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JANUARY 2002

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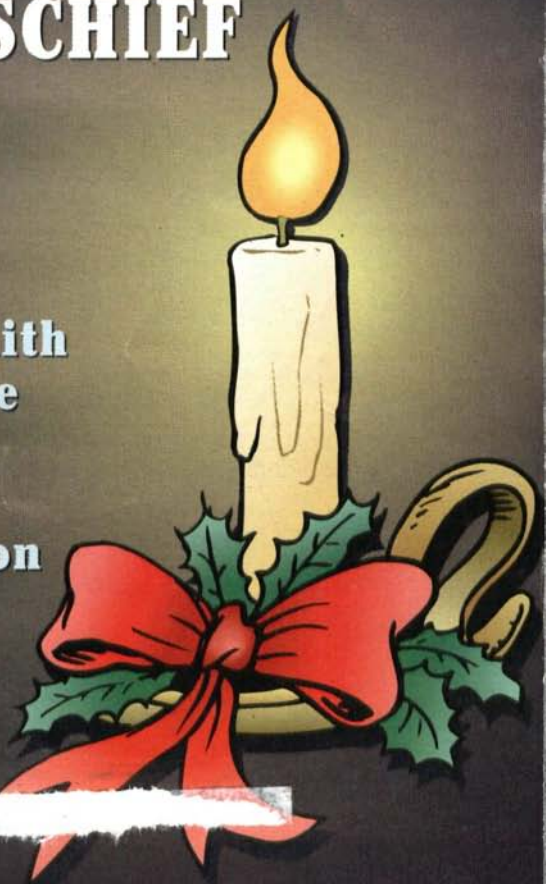

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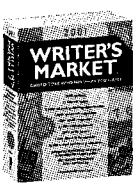

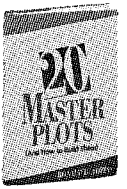

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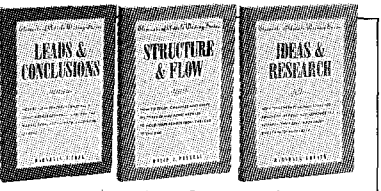

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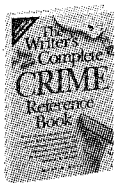

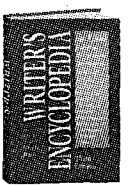

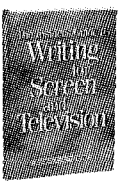

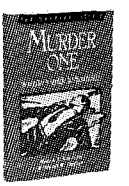

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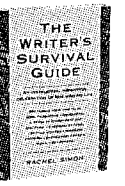

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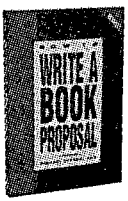

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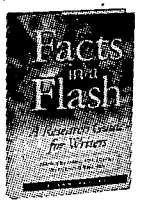

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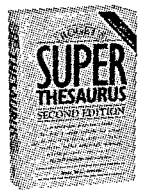

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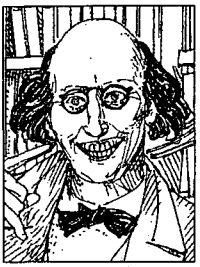

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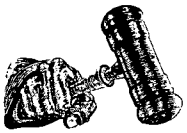

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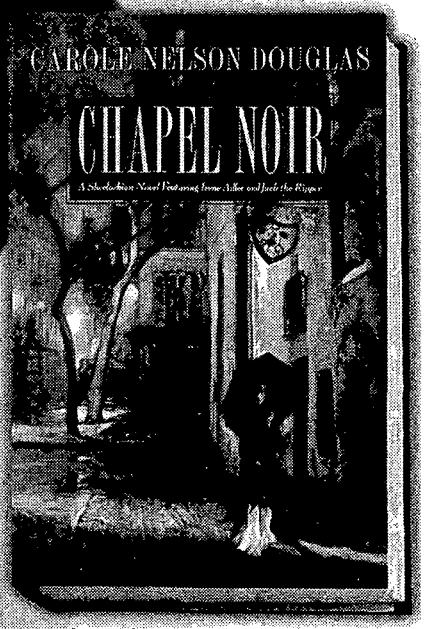

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THE GIRL WHO KILLED SANTA CLAUS

by Val McDermid

It was the night before Christmas, and not surprisingly, Kelly Jane Davidson was wide awake. It wasn't that she wanted to be. It wasn't as if she believed in Santa and expected to catch him coming down the chimney onto the coal-effect gas fire in the living room. After all, she was nearly eight now.

She felt scornful when she thought back to last Christmas when she'd still been a baby, a mere six-year-old who still believed that there really was an elf factory in Lapland where they made the toys; that there really was a team of reindeer who magically pulled a sleigh across the skies and somehow got round to all the world's children with sackloads of gifts; that she could really write a letter to Santa and he'd personally choose and deliver her presents.

Of course, she'd known for ages before then that the fat men in

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red suits and false beards who sat her on their knees in an assortment of gaudy grottoes weren't the real Santa. They were just men who dressed up and acted as messengers for the real Father Christmas, passing on her desires and giving her a token of what would be waiting for her on Christmas morning.

She'd had her suspicions about the rest of the story, so when Simon Sharp had told her in the playground that there wasn't really a Santa Claus, she hadn't even felt shocked or shaken. She hadn't tried to argue, not like her best friend Sarah, who had gone red in the face and looked like she was going to burst into tears. But it was obvious when you thought about it. Her mum was always complaining when she ordered things from catalogues and they sent the wrong thing. If the catalogue people couldn't get a simple order right, how could one fat man and a bunch of elves get the right toys to all the children in the world on one night?

So Kelly Jane had said goodbye to Santa without a moment's regret. She might have been more worried if she hadn't discovered the secret of the airing cupboard. Her mum had been downstairs making the tea, and Kelly Jane had wanted a pillowcase to make a sleeping bag for her favourite doll. She'd opened the airing cupboard and there, on the top shelf, she'd seen a stack of strangely shaped plastic bags. They were too high for her to reach, but she'd craned her neck and managed to see the corner of some packaging inside one of the bags. Her heart had started to pound with excitement, for she'd immediately recognised the familiar box that she'd been staring at in longing in the toy shop window for weeks.

She'd closed the door silently and crept back to her room. Her mum had said, "Wait and see what Santa brings you," as if she was still a silly baby, when she'd asked for the new Barbie doll. But here it was in the house.

Later, when her mum and dad were safely shut in the living room watching the telly, she'd crept out of bed and used the chair from her bedroom to climb up and explore further. It had left her feeling very satisfied. Santa or no Santa, she was going to have a great Christmas.

Val McDermid is one of England's foremost crime novelists. Her 1995 novel *The Mermaids Singing* won the CWA's Gold Dagger for best novel. That book and two subsequent thrillers, *The Wire in the Blood* and *The Last Temptation,* are all currently under development for TV. Ms. McDermid is also the author of two ongoing series of mystery novels, one featuring private eye Kate Brannigan, the other journalist sleuth Lindsay Gordon.

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Which was why she couldn't sleep. The prospect of playing with her new toys, not to mention showing them off to Sarah, was too exciting to let her drift off into dreams. Restless, she got out of bed and pulled the curtains open. It was a cold, clear night, and in spite of the city lights, she could still see the stars twinkling, the thin crescent of the moon like a knife cut in the dark blue of the sky. No sleigh or reindeers, though.

She had no idea how much time had passed when she heard the footsteps. Heavy, uneven thuds on the stairs. Not the light-footed tread of her mum, nor the measured footfalls of her dad. These were stumbling steps, irregular and clumsy, as if someone was negotiating unfamiliar territory.

Kelly Jane was suddenly aware how cold it had become. Her arms and legs turned to gooseflesh, the short hair on the back of her neck prickling with unease. Who—or what—was out there, in her house, in the middle of the night?

She heard a bump and a muffled voice grunting, as if in pain. It didn't sound like anyone she knew. It didn't even sound human. More like an animal. Or some sort of monster, like in the stories they'd read at school at Halloween. Trolls that ate little children. She'd remembered the trolls, and for weeks she'd taken the long way home to avoid going over the ring-road flyover. She knew it wasn't a proper bridge like trolls lived under, but she didn't want to take any chances. Sarah had agreed with her, though Simon Sharp had laughed at the pair of them. It would have served him right to have a troll in his house on Christmas Eve. It wasn't fair that it had come to her house, Kelly Jane thought, trying to make herself angry to drive the fear away.

It didn't work. Her stomach hurt. She'd never been this scared, not even when she had to have a filling at the dentist. She wanted to hide in her wardrobe, but she knew it was silly to go somewhere she could be trapped so easily. Besides, she had to know the worst.

On tiptoe, she crossed the room, blinking back tears. Cautiously, she turned the door handle and inched the door open. The landing light was off, but she could just make out a bulky shape standing by the airing cupboard. As her eyes adjusted to the deeper darkness, she could see an arm stretching up to the top shelf. It clutched the packages and put them in a sack. Her packages! Her Christmas presents!

With terrible clarity, Kelly Jane realised that this was no monster. It was a burglar, pure and simple. A bad man had broken into her house and was stealing her Christmas presents! Outrage flooded through her, banishing fear in that instant. As the bulky figure put the last parcel in his sack and turned back to the stairs, she launched herself through the door and raced down the land-

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ing, crashing into the burglar's legs just as he took the first step. "Go away, you bad burglar!" she screamed.

Caught off balance, he crashed head over heels down the stairs, a yell of surprise splitting the silence of the night like an axe slicing through a log.

Kelly Jane cannoned into the bannisters and rebounded onto the top step, breathless and exhilarated. She'd stopped the burglar! She was a hero!

But where were her mum and dad? Surely they couldn't have slept through all of this?

She opened their bedroom door and saw to her dismay that their bed was empty, the curtains still wide open. Where were they? What was going on? And why hadn't anyone sounded the alarm?

Back on the landing, she peered down the stairs and saw a crumpled heap in the hallway. He wasn't moving. Nervously, she decided she'd better call the police herself.

She inched down the stairs, never taking her eyes off the burglar in case he suddenly jumped up and came after her.

Step by careful step, she edged closer.

Three stairs from the bottom, enough light spilled in through the glass panels in the front door for Kelly Jane to see what she'd really done.

There, in the middle of the hallway, lay the prone body of Santa Claus. Not moving. Not even breathing.

She'd killed Santa Claus.

Simon Sharp was wrong. Sarah was right. And now Kelly Jane had killed him.

With a stifled scream, she turned tail and raced back to her bedroom, slamming the door shut behind her. Now she was shivering in earnest, her whole body trembling from head to foot. She dived into bed, pulling the duvet over her head. But it made no difference. She felt as if her body had turned to stone, her blood to ice. She couldn't stop shaking, her teeth chattering like popcorn in a pan.

She'd killed Santa Claus.

All over the world, children would wake up to no Christmas presents because Kelly Jane Davidson had murdered Santa. And everyone would know who to blame, because his dead body was lying in her hallway. Until the day she died, people would point at her in the street and go, "There's Kelly Jane Davidson, the girl who murdered Christmas."

Whimpering, she lay curled under her duvet, terrible remorse flooding her heart. She'd never sleep again.

But somehow, she did. When her mum threw open the door and shouted, "Merry Christmas!" Kelly Jane was sound asleep. For one wonderful moment, she forgot what had happened. Then it came

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pouring back in and she peered timidly over the edge of the duvet at her mum. She didn't seem upset or worried. How could she have missed the dead body in the hall?

"Don't you want your presents?" her mum asked. "I can't believe you're still in bed. It's nine o'clock. You've never slept this late on Christmas morning before. Come on, Santa's been!"

Nobody knew that better than Kelly Jane. What had happened? Had the reindeer summoned the elves to take Santa's body away, leaving her presents behind? Was she going to be the only child who had Christmas presents this year? Reluctantly, she climbed out of bed and dawdled downstairs behind her mum, gazing in worried amazement at the empty expanse of the hall carpet.

She trailed into the living room, feet dragging with every step. There, under the tree, was the usual pile of brightly wrapped gifts. Kelly Jane looked up at her mum, an anxious frown on her face. "Are these all for me?" she asked. Somehow, it felt wrong to be rewarded for killing Santa Claus.

Her mum grinned. "All for you. Oh, and there was a note with them as well." She handed Kelly Jane a Christmas card with a picture of a reindeer on the front.

Kelly Jane took it gingerly and opened it. Inside, in shaky capital letters, it read, "Don't worry. You can never kill me. I'm magic. Happy Christmas from Santa Claus."

A slow smile spread across her face. It was all right! She hadn't murdered Santa after all!

Before she could say another word, the door to the kitchen opened and her dad walked in. He had the biggest black eye Kelly Jane had ever seen, even on the telly. The whole of one side of his face was all bruised, and his left arm was encased in plaster. "What happened, Dad?" she asked, running to hug him in her dismay.

He winced. "Careful, Kelly, I'm all bruised."

"But what happened to you?" she demanded, stepping back.

"Your dad had a bit too much to drink at the office party last night," her mum said hastily. "He had a fall."

"But I'm going to be just fine. Why don't you open your presents?" he said, gently pushing Kelly Jane towards the tree.

As she stripped the paper from the first of her presents, her mum and dad stood watching. "That'll teach me to leave you alone in the house on Christmas Eve," her mum said softly.

Her dad tried to smile, but gave up when the pain kicked in. "Bloody Santa suit," he said. "How was I to know she'd take me for a burglar?" ●

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Thirty-Two Squares

by Conrad Lawrence

There were thirty-two squares between Trigve Offerdahl and the love of his life, thirty-two alternately red and white squares from his side of the table to the other side, where sat Trigve's true love, his raison d'être, the woman who defined his life, Hannah.

Well, the truth be told, Hannah wasn't exactly any of those. True, his marriage to Hannah had robbed him of the opportunity to have any other love in his life, so technically she *was* the love of his life. And, she did define his life and had done so quite vociferously every morning for forty-nine years, eleven months, and twenty-nine days, at that very table, while serving him eggs with runny yolks. But Trigve would never agree that she was his reason for being, even if she claimed she was. She wasn't exactly any of the things those romantic idioms implied. She had been at one time, perhaps, or so Trigve must have thought. Why else would he have allowed himself to spend nearly fifty years with a woman separated by only thirty-two red and white squares of plasticized, vinylized, rubberized, or whatever-ized kitchen tablecloth?

Of all the things that Hannah wasn't exactly, most importantly, she wasn't exactly there. Thirty-two squares away, in a chair normally occupied by his zaftig Vikingesque mate-for-life, was Fred the cat, a rotund gray tabby with a Cheshire grin on his face. And why shouldn't he be happy? He had his front paws up on the table and a soup bowl filled with homogenized, vitamin D whole milk set before him. Had she something to say about it, Hannah never

Originally from Madison, Wisconsin, Conrad Lawrence now lives in Chicago with his wife and seven cats. His career has included work as a cinematographer and fine arts photographer. Fifteen years ago he turned to fiction writing. He is the author of eight novels, several of which fall under the heading "science fiction." "Thirty-Two Squares" is Mr. Lawrence's first work for us, a humorous, if somewhat sad, tale.

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would have put up with an animal setting its paws on the table. More so, she would have a fit at the thick droplets catapulting from Fred's rapidly lapping tongue, dappling the red and white squares with beads of congealing milk. Frankly, Hannah never would have let Fred in the house.

However, Hannah was still upstairs in bed with all those people fussing over her. There was the police, the coroner's forensics people, the police photographer, and the crisis intervention counselor who'd come to intervene in what had surely to be the biggest crisis of Trigve's life. The pert, nervously thin young version of Hannah had sat there, thirty-two squares away, in Hannah's chair, the one now occupied by Fred, and had plied Trigve with her intervention. Like Hannah, her jaw seemed to work faster than the human brain could muster truly meaningful thoughts. Words flew out of her mouth, hopping like locusts across the table, over his shoulder, and out the door behind him. Trigve simply stared at her with a tired doe-eyed expression that he periodically broke with a bored blink. With his paws curled under him, Fred had sat on the steps, peering under the banister with the same doe-eyed expression, hoping that the social worker wouldn't lap up any milk in the bowl before her.

The woman wasn't at all interested in the milk, and when she reached a point of exasperation with Trigve's silent response, she looked down at the bowl with surprise as if seeing it for the first time. Her brow crinkled. She looked at Trigve with a subdued look of horrified worry and excused herself, profusely, to join the others in the bedroom. Trigve could hear them up there, clumping about in their official, thick-soled shoes, speaking in low, flat-toned mumbles. He somehow suspected that even if he were in the room with them, the words would still come out as a mash of monotone mumbling. As soon as the woman had left, Fred had taken the chair still warmed by the social worker's tight little fanny. In Trigve's mind, Fred was much better company than the social worker. In fact, he was much better breakfast company than Trigve had shared in quite a long time. Other than a polite mewl when he'd hopped up on the chair, Fred hadn't uttered a word, yet he was expressive. The low rumbling of his purr quite adequately communicated his appreciation for the milk. Unlike the constant barrage of words, it was easy on the ears. That morning, Fred had become Trigve's personal hero.

Trigve picked up his fork, looked at the plate before him. The two eggs on the plate stared back at him with their pale, pleading yolks. With the side of the fork, he cut into the yolk of one egg. It did not run. For the first time in a day short of fifty years, his yolk was not runny. Trigve hated runny yolks, but his yolk had not been hard since he had married Hannah. He almost couldn't eat

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the egg, he just wanted to look at the clean cut that curved into that yolk. He looked up and smiled as the sun crested the trees and bathed him in a shaft of light streaming through the window. It was almost as if the great yellow orb were acknowledging his epiphany. His smile widened as he listened to the sound of far-off traffic. In all the years he'd eaten breakfast at that table, he'd never heard it before that morning. All he'd ever heard was the rapid succession of verbosity that fired from Hannah's mouth and bounded about the kitchen, splattering the red and blue and dull purple printed wallpaper. He looked around the room. Hannah loved that wallpaper with its little Scandinavian figures in their red outfits dancing about between rosemaling that looked a bit like flowers. He'd have to replace the wallpaper. It was all word-spattered. Maybe, Trigve considered, he should have the kitchen painted. Hannah would never hear of it. Fred looked up from his bowl, ran his tongue along his upper lip, and squinted his eyes at Trigve in perfect contentment. He too was happy with Trigve's epiphany.

Trigve squinted his eyes back at Fred. He ran his hand over the smooth sheen of the whatever-ized checkered tablecloth. It felt like plastic, cold and impenetrable. He was sure it was why Hannah preferred it over linen. She claimed it was because it could be wiped off with a sponge, and it did look nice. Hannah was, at all times, practical. He couldn't argue with her about the practicality of a vinylized tablecloth. He couldn't argue with her about anything. No one could. Hannah liked very much to win all of her arguments. Hannah always said the red and white squares made it seem like a picnic when they were at the table. Trigve never wanted a picnic at the table. He wanted picnics outdoors, in the woods, in that clearing by the spring where Hannah used to run around when she was still thin, but had enough roundness to be just the right amount of jiggly. It was a jiggly that smart men never talk about enjoying. For as soon as any man speaks of this small rapture, women stiffen up and quit being quite so fluid in that pleasing way they move under a loose-fitting summer dress.

Likely, Hannah had been just as prolific with the words then, but Trigve couldn't remember minding. She was so much fun to watch that he wasn't really paying attention to the words. In his whole life, he never really could pay attention to the words. Hannah could put out more words in five minutes than any single person could attend to in a given month. He ran his finger around on the oil-slick-like surface of the tablecloth, tracing one white square, then began to automatically count the thirty-two squares between him and . . . He stopped. He didn't need to count them to know that there were thirty-two squares there. He'd counted them every day for the last fifty years. To break this ridiculous habit,

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he'd have to get rid of that tablecloth. Perhaps he could even treat himself to a white linen cloth, or a red one, or a canary yellow one, or a lime green one. But first, he'd have to get a box of crayons. He could have some fun with a plasticized tablecloth and a box of crayons. He began to consider the possibility of there being a box of crayons somewhere in the house.

"You don't seem disturbed." The words tumbled into the room, disrupting his breakfast, invading his cerebral crayon search and paradise of silence. He withdrew as he always had with Hannah, reeling in his anger, as he always had with Hannah, keeping it silent. But it wasn't Hannah invading him with words. It was a man's voice, and it held the barest quiver of uncertainty that would never have afflicted Hannah. He turned his head a bit and his eyes even further. Coming down the steps, into the kitchen, was that detective, Roberson, the one who wrote on that new device instead of a notebook. He'd called the little black device a PDA. He was always scrawling on that little green screen with a pencil that was really just a stick. Trigve glanced to Fred, who flattened his ears and looked sidelong at the detective. Trigve tried to flatten his ears also to communicate to Fred that he felt the same displeasure at the intrusion. With a last lick of his chops, Fred left the table, hopping up on the counter behind Trigve, licking his paw and running it around his face. The detective repeated himself. "I said, Mr. Offerdahl, you don't seem disturbed."

It became clear to Trigve that the doe-eyed silent response wouldn't send the detective away as it had with the nervous social worker. He would have to answer, so he gave it some thought. "Well, I've never had psychotherapy, but everyone I know says I'm a pretty good guy, stable, able to hold a job and all; until I retired, that is."

"What?" Detective Roberson was confused enough that he actually lifted the pencil-that-wasn't off of his PDA-thingie.

"Well, in my whole life, no one has ever indicated to me that they thought I was disturbed." Trigve was trying to be as helpful as he could, but he really didn't understand a detective that carried a gizmo instead of a notepad, so he didn't know exactly what to say to help Detective Roberson understand.

The slack-jawed scepticism that pulled Detective Roberson's features down clearly indicated that he *didn't* understand. "No. I was talking about your wife."

"Well, I might have been too close to the situation to say fairly, but I guess you might find some folks who'd say that she was disturbed. Others might say that she was just a bit eccentric. Some might have called her charming. I think she may have talked just a bit too much."

"No." Roberson tried to hold a lid on his impatience. It wouldn't

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be unusual for an old man such as Trigve Offerdahl to suffer some form of confused shock when he'd just lost the anchor of his life. But there were some elements of Hannah Offerdahl's death that just picked at that part of Roberson indulged by police detectives as a *hunch*. "I was talking about you, about your wife. You don't seemed disturbed that she's dead. She's upstairs without a single breath of life left in her and you're down here, eating eggs."

"Yes." Trigve smiled boyishly. "Eggs with hard yolks." He could see by the wash of horror on Roberson's face that the detective hadn't experienced enough of life to truly understand the enjoyment of having his yolk hard for the first time in nearly half a century.

Roberson straightened, blinked, and pulled his jaw closed. "When, ah . . . ?" He stopped, furrowed his brow, and looked at Trigve, not quite sure if he should delve into the deeper, possibly Freudian or Jungian, meaning of hard yolks. He decided it wasn't intrinsic to the case and continued, "When did you first notice that your wife was dead?"

"When her eyes were wide open, yet nothing was coming out of her mouth."

"You mean, no breath was coming out of her mouth?"

"No. I mean words. Whenever Hannah was awake, she always had something to say." Trigve was beginning to think that Detective Roberson was not very intuitive.

"And when did you discover that?"

"Just before I called you." In Trigve's estimation not only was Roberson not intuitive, he wasn't particularly bright.

"Me?"

"Yes. Nine-one-one. The police." Trigve began to suspect that Roberson's dull-wittedness may have been one of those police ploys to catch potential suspects in some sort of fabrication; like that detective on television that wore the trenchcoat and drove the old junker of a car. He never seemed to understand what was taking place, yet always solved the case.

Roberson nodded and looked at his PDA-thingie as if it were some sort of a crystal ball. He stuck his tongue in his cheek and pushed it around as he was thinking, then his eyes snapped up, locking on Trigve's. "Do you have any desire to know what killed your wife?"

"Do you want to tell me?"

"Only if you are interested." Roberson squinted, taking a more studied view of Trigve's eyes. Trigve nodded. Roberson found himself nodding also as he tried to follow Trigve's eyes. He stopped nodding and made a single quick shake of his head. "She had some sort of reaction and choked."

"Reaction?"

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"Reaction."

"How do you mean 'reaction'?"

Roberson leaned forward as if he was on to something. "An allergic reaction. It caused her throat to swell up and she couldn't breathe. Did your wife ever mention that she had any allergies?"

"I'm sure she must have mentioned them if she had any. My wife talked about everything and anything."

"What did she say her allergies were?"

"I don't recall."

"You don't recall what your wife said about her allergies?" Roberson sounded annoyingly stupefied.

"My wife said so many things a person couldn't possibly take it all in."

At that point, Fred decided to join the conversation. He made a quick, bleating sort of meow that seemed to hold a hint of pride to it. If meows were words, it would have been considered a one syllable meow, a simple monosyllabic declarative meow. Roberson and Trigve turned to Fred, who had finished washing his face and sat in a very proper upright manner. He sat up on his haunches with his paws before him; his legs were straight and together. His tail was wrapped around him, covering his paws. He had a Mona Lisa smile and cocked his head at Trigve, giving him a contented squint. Trigve squinted back at Fred. Fred cocked his head at Roberson, giving the detective a similar squint. The detective felt as though he was left outside of some inside joke. He studied the side of Trigve's face, knowing he probably wouldn't ever get satisfactory answers from the old gentleman. When Trigve looked back to him he took a different tack. "Are you feeling all right, Mr. Offerdahl?"

Trigve's face sagged and his eyes lost their contented squint. "Actually, I'm feeling quite fine. Why do you ask?"

Roberson nodded back at the counter. "There's a bottle of cod fish oil." Trigve looked and, sure enough, right next to Fred was a bottle of codfish oil. Trigve suspected it had something to do with Fred's present mood of contentment. Roberson continued, "My grandfather always used codfish oil when he was . . . well . . . when he needed . . . you know."

Trigve nodded. "I know. I just had the bottle out because I thought old Fred here might like some. I'm fine."

Roberson nodded, his eyes peering deep into Trigve's, then he tried to surprise Trigve, to see if he could catch a glimpse of something in those eyes, something less than honest. "Didn't you hear your wife choking?"

"No."

Roberson pushed aside Fred's milk bowl and set his arms on the

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table, leaning on his elbows. "How could you not hear your wife choke, if she was lying in bed next to you?"

Keeping his eyes on Roberson, Trigve pointed to a door just off the kitchen. Through the door was the television room, the only place in the house that Hannah would allow Trigve to clutter up with things like *TV Guides*, slippers, newspapers, and the other sundry accessories that go along with relaxing in front of the TV. She never would have allowed any such clutter in the living room at the front of the house. Trigve was never sure why it was called a *living* room when no one was ever allowed to live in it. Consequently, Trigve had been forced to insulate and panel the back porch. After that the porch was no longer called a porch, it was called the *TV room.* Through the door from the kitchen could be seen a beat-up Strata-Lounger covered with Naugahyde and draped with a rumpled quilt on which sat a dented pillow. Trigve waited for the first signs of confusion to paint Roberson's face before explaining. "I didn't sleep upstairs—next to my wife. I slept there."

Roberson looked sidelong at Trigve with skepticism. "But your wife left room for you. I mean, we found her on one side of the bed. And it's a pretty big bed."

Trigve looked down at his plate. He was not going to get a chance to enjoy his wonderfully hard yolk. He poked at it with his fork. The egg had cooled and had become rubberized like some toy. As he pushed it with the fork, it slid about the plate as a single mass. "My wife not only spoke during her waking hours, but would mumble and speak in her sleep. It would keep me awake, so most nights I would eventually come sleep down here."

Roberson pulled his hands back and looked at them with disdain, realizing that he'd set them in the dapples of milk tossed from the bowl by Fred's hungry tongue. He looked about him for a napkin. Seeing the detective's conundrum, Trigve gave him the napkin from his lap, but not until after he had wiped his own mouth. Not seeing any better options, Roberson accepted it. Once he'd wiped off his hands, he looked to Trigve. "Do you and your wife normally sleep with the window open and no screen? I mean, there are a lot of bugs and it's allergy season." He looked to Trigve and blinked. Trigve blinked back. Roberson prompted. "I mean, its clear now that your wife had allergies, maybe to some bug or something that could have flown in and bit her or stung her."

Trigve could see what the detective needed. "I took the screens off yesterday. I was planning on cleaning and painting them today—or tomorrow—or maybe the next day." Roberson picked up his leadless pencil and jotted down notes on his PDA-thingie, notes about screens, Trigve's sleeping, and words. Wasn't that

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ironic, thought Trigve, that the detective was writing words about words.

Later, after Roberson and all the other people had left, taking Hannah with them, Trigve and Fred were watching TV. Trigve had taken the TV from the TV room and moved it into the living room. Along with it he had brought a respectable amount of clutter: a newspaper, the *TV Guide,* and even a couple of glasses of milk. He sat on the sofa with the plastic cover removed and his feet up on the coffee table. At the other end of the couch Fred was busily licking his fur and quietly expressing his contentment without a single word, just the constant low rumble of his purring. This was all very well and everything was just fine with Fred and Trigve, who found themselves quite happy with each other's company and low-verbiage way of communicating. This camaraderie continued until late in the afternoon, when there came a knock on the door.

At the door was the man from next door—Trigve was sure his name was Al—and his young son, Arnie. Trigve knew Arnie's name because of the number of times he'd heard Arnie's mother, Alice, yell it from their back door. Arnie stood right in front of his father like a miniature clone of his dad. Both of them were very erect, square-shouldered, exuding anxiety. Both had pinched looks of concern on their faces. Arnie was silent, but his dad gave Trigve the impression that he used more words than was necessary. Maybe it was the nervous way he ran them all together. "Excuse me, Mr. Offerdahl, I, we hate to disturb you but, we were just wondering, you see, Arnie has been running around all day looking for his cat, Fred, and can't find him, and we were just wondering if, well, maybe he's gotten up on your roof again, or something like that." He paused to take a breath. "Have you seen Fred?"

Trigve tipped his head back, peering through the reading portion of his bifocals at Al and Arnie, which actually put the two somewhat out of focus. That was good, because it gave him the opportunity to focus his attention on the task of processing all the words Al had just thrown at him and filter out what was important: Had he seen Fred? Trigve made a quick contemplative nod and stepped back. He opened the door further and gestured to the couch where Fred was seated, paws spread indelicately, using his tongue to groom the fur on his stomach. "Fred!" Arnie ran into the room. Fred looked up, making a squawking, inquisitive noise that couldn't really be called a meow of any respectable sort. Arnie nearly dove into Fred's exposed tummy, wrapping his hands around the cat and mashing him against his face. Though nearly strangled by the affection, Fred didn't seem to mind.

"Oh, gee," prattled Al, "there he is. We've been so worried. Arnie's been all over the neighborhood, all day long, looking and looking

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and looking for his cat. It would have broken his heart if we hadn't found him. How long has he been here?"

"Well, let's see. I found him curled up on my lap when I woke up this morning."

"He's been here all day, then?"

Trigve nodded. "Didn't seem to want to leave. I think he's rather enjoyed himself."

"Good." Al had a stupefied expression on his face as he studied Trigve, indicating he didn't necessarily think it was good that Fred had enjoyed himself. "How'd he get in here?"

"Not sure. I s'pose it might have been through the bedroom window. I understand we left it open last night."

"But what about Mrs. Offerdahl? I thought she told Alice that she was deathly allergic to cats, didn't she? I mean, she was awfully mad at Arnie last month when Fred got up on the roof outside your bedroom window. I'm horribly sorry if Fred has caused you any trouble."

"Mrs. Offerdahl passed on last night. Doesn't seem that she got the chance to tell Fred she didn't want him around." Trigve turned to watch Arnie run his fingers up and down Fred's spine as Fred wandered back and forth over Arnie's lap. "And Fred was no problem. He's nice company. I think he's my hero." Al squinted at Trigve in that universal way one squints at anyone when they want to question what has just been said, but are really too afraid of what the answer may be. The idea of Fred the cat being anyone's hero was ludicrous to Al, but for the sake of being polite, he let it go. Instead, he was profusely sorry for Trigve's loss, mapping out all the grief, sorrow, anxiety, and pain that Trigve should be feeling, but didn't. Very quickly Al's words quit being distinct, separate words and became a stream of *wah-wah*s and *blah-blah*s that flitted about the front foyer while Trigve considered what his evening television viewing schedule might consist of. Fifty years with Hannah had left him with some very specialized survival skills.

After Arnie had collected Fred and departed with his father, Trigve returned to watching TV in the living room with his feet up on the coffee table and the plastic cover to the couch wadded up in a corner. To spare himself eating on the red and white plasticized tablecloth, he treated himself to a pizza, which he ordered by phone. While waiting for it to be delivered, he trudged down to the little store at the corner and got himself a six-pack, further treating himself to a beer with his pizza. He savored the beer, and the idea of drinking a brew even if there was no special occasion, although if Hannah were around, she might have had some other idea as to whether her passing was a special occasion. Looking

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into the refrigerator, he realized that he had the makings for five more nights of this kind of unfettered reckless abandon.

There were moments throughout the evening when he had to admit that he felt a certain sense of loneliness, usually when a commercial came on the television. It was the first time in fifty years that the house was void of constant words, but he had to admit a word here or there, just a quick one-syllable reassurance that he was not alone, might be nice. Trigve had to admit that he sort of missed Fred's company and considered he might need to get a cat.

Two days later, Trigve was in the middle of a special project when Detective Roberson knocked on the door. The day before, Trigve had taken a bus all the way to the mall to find one of those huge toy stores so he could buy the biggest box of crayons manufactured. The kind with the crayon sharpener built right into the box. This particular morning, Trigve had cleared all the breakfast plates and the creamer and the sugar bowl from the table, then he'd carefully sponged off the shiny tablecloth, first with soapy water, then with clean rinse water. While he waited for it to dry, he drank his third cup of coffee at the counter so as not to leave a ring on the table. That was two more cups than Hannah had ever permitted him to drink in one morning.

Once the sheen was dry, Trigve started at one corner, doodling little crayon doodles in each of the white squares. By the time he had nearly one quarter of all the white squares filled with pictures he figured he should take up art, predicting that he could quickly make a name for himself, for there were not many artists versed in the medium of crayon on plasticized linen. He had even decided on a title for his first piece: *Thirty-Two Squares: A Tribute to Hannah.* He would render an image in all the white squares except those that were part of the thirty-two that had separated him from Hannah all those years at the table.

He'd put images in nearly half the white squares when Roberson's knock came on the back door that led from the TV room to the backyard. He was working on a particularly detailed sunrise scene, so he didn't answer the door until the third knock. He opened the door and stood back without greeting the detective, sure that Roberson would initiate the conversation, which the detective did. "I was sure you were here. I've been at the front door, ringing your bell for a while. I know it works, because I could hear it outside."

Trigve looked off and down, giving the recent past some thought. "I guess I do remember hearing a bell ring."

The two of them stood gazing at each other. Roberson was waiting for further explanation as to why Trigve didn't answer the door, and Trigve was sure that he could depend on Roberson to

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further the conversation if a conversation was to be necessary. Again, Roberson did not let him down. "We've found out what killed your wife." Trigve raised his eyebrows and nodded, but said nothing. Roberson continued, "Would you like to know what it was?"

"I just assumed you would tell me. I can't imagine you came all the way over here from the police station to tell me you know what killed my wife without telling me what that something might be."

Roberson felt, rightfully, foolish. "Can I come in?" Trigve nodded and stepped further aside. As he watched Roberson walk into the kitchen, he considered that a part of training in detective school was a certain walk that detectives were supposed to affect when relaying the events that lead to someone's demise. He'd seen Sherlock Holmes affect that walk in many movies and now Roberson was doing the same walk. It was kind of a long-strided strut and just before the detective spoke, he would pull out some prop device and play with it in his hands for effect. In Sherlock Holmes's case it was a pipe. In Roberson's case it was his PDA-thingie. He read from it as he spoke, though when Trigve heard what he had to say, he was sure the detective had it all memorized. "It was—" Roberson halted, his eyes catching Trigve's crayoned artwork. It threw off the detective's pacing and delivery. He pointed to the table and looked over his shoulder at Trigve with a worried, questioning frown.

With a quick shake of his head, he remembered what his purpose had been, regained his stride, and started his pronouncement again. "It was an allergy, as we suspected. As a matter of fact, the medical examiner is sure it was a reaction to cat dander." Roberson spun about, quick to catch Trigve's response, which was, to say the least, disappointing. Trigve only gave the detective the same doe-eyed expression that had driven the crisis-intervention counselor from the table the morning Hannah had died. Roberson took two steps back toward Trigve. "Don't you think that's odd?"

Trigve shook his head.

Roberson stepped two steps closer. "You don't?"

Trigve pushed the back door closed. "Why should it be odd? I would think that an allergy to cats is fairly commonplace."

"But you have a cat. Doesn't that make it odd? Why would you have a cat when Mrs. Offerdahl was allergic to them and why would it kill her all of a sudden? Had Mrs. Offerdahl forgotten to take some allergy medication that night?"

Trigve went to the counter and poured himself another cup of coffee, his fourth, without offering one to Roberson. "We don't have a cat, Detective Roberson. What makes you think we have a cat?"

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Roberson pointed to the counter. "Because I saw one sitting right there two days ago."

"That was Fred. He belongs to the little boy next door."

Roberson was very careful to watch how Trigve answered his next question. "Why would you let a cat into the house when you knew that your wife was allergic to them?"

"I didn't know that Fred was in the house until after Hannah was dead."

"How did he get in?"

Trigve shrugged, then leaned a little closer to Roberson with a squint in his eye. "Do you think that we should take Fred downtown, throw a light in his face, and grill him? We could find out how he got in. I bet you detectives have ways of getting information like that from a cat." Behind the squint was a gleam of mischievousness.

Roberson stepped back. "I think that he came in through the open window in your bedroom. Maybe he climbed in bed with your wife and she reacted to his dander."

"You're not going to arrest Fred for killing my wife, are you? Little Arnie would be heartbroken if someone took his cat."

"No, but I do think it's odd that he knew the screen was off and that he could get inside that night. That's an awful lot of reasoning for a cat."

"I don't know, Detective Roberson. Fred is a pretty smart cat. He may have had this planned all along, watching night after night, knowing that I clean the screens this time every year. Maybe he was watching for just the night when the window was open and the screen was off, just waiting for his chance. He was pretty nice to me the other day. I even considered putting him in my will. Maybe he has this all planned and as soon as he knows he'll get my estate, I'll be next." Trigve finished his sentence by running his extended finger across his neck and glaring at Roberson with crazy eyes. It was a mock craziness, but it was still crazy.

Roberson stared back, knowing that the old man was goading him and beginning to see his own hunch as possibly being a bit far-fetched: "I'm going to leave now, Mr. Offerdahl, but I will be looking into what would cause that cat to crawl into your window."

Roberson marched off toward the door, but Trigve stopped him just after he opened it. "Should I tell the family next door that their pet is a suspect in a murder case, just to be fair?" Roberson didn't justify the question with an answer. Trigve went back to drawing on the plasticized tablecloth.

The next time Trigve saw Roberson, the detective once again interrupted him in the middle of a project. This time, he was cleaning the inside of the microwave oven with a plastic spatula. For breakfast that morning, Trigve had decided to experiment

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with the possibilities of making his egg yolks hard using the microwave. He had it in mind it would save cleaning a pan. He'd since decided that cleaning the pan was easier. The most dynamic of the eggs he experimented with was the one he put in the microwave shell and all. That one brought Alice running over from next door thinking she'd heard a gun go off when the egg exploded. She returned home with a smile on her face, but Trigve couldn't be sure whether it was relief that no one had fired a gun or if she had found Trigve's culinary techniques to be amusing.

This time the detective came right to the back door and Trigve answered it on the first knock, glad to take a break from his new project. He left the spatula in the microwave, closed its door, then opened the back door. Once again he waited for Roberson to initiate the conversation, and the detective proved to be as dependable as ever. "I need to speak with you."

Trigve stepped back and Roberson shot into the kitchen with long strides; the same long strides that Trigve was sure Roberson had learned in detective school, but his movement was different. "We found something." Roberson spoke in a distant manner as his eyes darted all about the kitchen as if looking for evidence. "Something we think is rather important."

Trigve found himself watching Roberson's eyes as they swung this way and then that. He found himself looking about his own kitchen, following wherever Roberson would look. "What are you looking for, Detective Roberson?"

Roberson quit looking around the room and locked eyes with Trigve. "Codfish oil." Trigve turned his head slightly away, angling the better of his two eyes toward Roberson to best study the detective. Roberson tapped the top of the kitchen counter. "I saw some here the other day."

Trigve nodded.

Roberson prompted, "Where is it?"

"I believe I threw it out."

"Why?"

"Because I had no use for it and it does have a bit of a stench."

"Why did you buy it in the first place? What use did you originally have for it?"

Trigve shrugged. "Who said I bought it? Remember, until recently two of us lived in this house."

Roberson nodded one of those knowing detective nods that says he really knew otherwise. "It doesn't matter." Roberson extracted a small bottle of codfish oil from inside his coat. "Do you have a bowl I could borrow?"

"Why?" Trigve was sceptical.

"For a little experiment." Roberson looked over to the old man,

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seeing that scepticism held him in his place. "Please indulge me, Mr. Offerdahl."

Trigve retrieved a bowl from the cupboard. Roberson poured a generous bit of the oil into the bowl and took it to the door to the TV room, where he set it on the floor. Then he opened the back door from the TV room to the backyard, leaving it open when he returned to the kitchen. He took out his PDA-thingie and began to review some notes he had on it. Trigve watched the detective, his interest piqued enough to initiate conversation. "Now what?"

"We wait." Roberson continued to review notes he'd written to himself at a previous time. Taking advantage of the silence that Roberson seemed willing to provide, Trigve returned to his task of cleaning the microwave. Though Roberson pretended not to watch Trigve, Trigve caught the detective glancing at him whenever he glanced at the detective. So the two whiled away the time, glancing at each other while pretending to be absorbed in some other task.

Trigve nearly had the microwave project completed when he heard a quick one-syllable greeting. It wasn't a distinct word, but it was definitely a greeting and it was definitely friendly. Trigve looked to Roberson, who looked back to him with a smirk of victory. "Seems my experiment is a success." The detective pushed away from the counter and went to the back door, opening the screen door. In waltzed Trigve's new friend and personal hero, Fred. Fred gave Trigve one quick squawk of a meow, then cantered right up to the bowl of codfish oil. Roberson followed. "Look, it's Fred, the neighbor cat. Seems he could smell the fish oil all the way next door and came to get some of it."

Trigve gave Roberson that same doe-eyed expression he'd perfected over years of having Hannah harp at him about this and that. It would have been the perfect expression for a game of poker, for no one could ever tell what emotions were hidden behind it: sadness, anger, excitement, fear. Roberson bent down and began scratching Fred's ears as Fred furiously lapped at the bowl of codfish oil, spattering drops out of the bowl with his tongue. "Look at the mess Fred is making. He's pushing nearly as much out of the bowl as he's lapping up." Roberson pointed to the increasing droplets of codfish oil on the floor. "We found droplets of codfish oil on the window sill of your bedroom the morning Hannah died, almost as if old Fred here had indulged in a bowl left for him in the window."

He got up and began moving toward Trigve. It was clear he was about to play his trump card. "You know what else we found?" Trigve shook his head. Roberson stopped a mere foot away from the old man. "The forensics team found codfish oil smeared on Hannah's pillow, right beside her mouth and nose. I'm sure old

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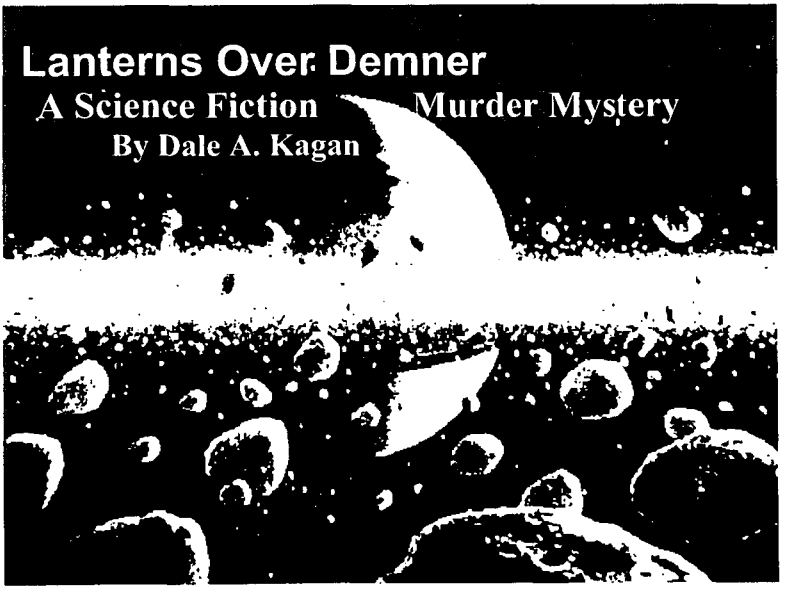
Fred here would have found that to be a real treat and must have hopped up on the bed to sniff it out." Roberson gazed at Trigve as if there was some way that he could penetrate that doe-eyed mask of his. "Tell me, Trigve, how do you think that codfish oil got smeared on your wife's pillow?"

Trigve shrugged.

Six months later, there were thirty-two squares between Trigve Offerdahl and the desire of his life: thirty-two glazed, institutionally beige square tiles from his bunk to the iron-bar door that was the only exit from his cell. Trigve knew that somewhere beyond those bars was silence. He'd experienced it, briefly, after the death of his wife. But now his life was filled with the constant noise of human verbosity. There was not a minute in the day that words didn't flow from someone's mouth to echo about the cement and tile walls to afflict everyone in the cell block. Trigve could no more escape the constant stream of meaningless words than he could when he sat across the table from Hannah, separated only by a red and white, plasticized, vinylized or whatever-ized tablecloth. At least, thought Trigve, he didn't have to worry about his yolk being hard. In prison they only served scrambled eggs. ●



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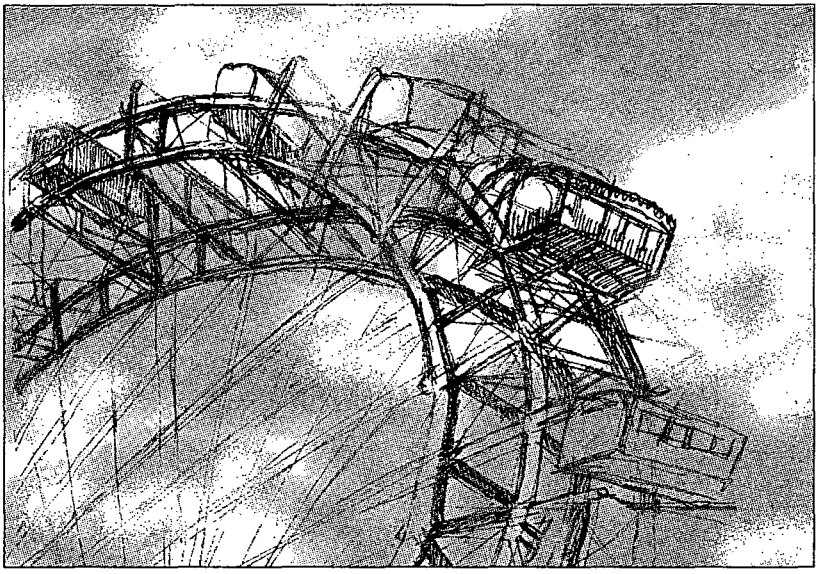

Art by June Levine

WHEEL IN THE SKY

by Edward D. Hoch

By the autumn of 1897 Oswald Lustig had been retired two years from the Vienna Police Department. His life had fallen into a weekly routine that had changed little since the death of his wife Lisa the previous year. On Fridays he still went to the new police headquarters, barely eleven years old, to collect his pension and speak with old friends. Their greetings had grown more perfunctory with the passage of time, consisting mainly of a hasty word or two from Captain Hesse in the midst of a busy day.

Then, if the weather allowed, Lustig would take a horse-drawn streetcar down the Schottenring to the Danube canal. It was a long, pleasant walk along the canal, with the mammoth new Ferris wheel at the Prater growing larger in his vision as he neared it. He often wished his wife had lived to see the completion of this marvel of architecture, a true rival of Paris's Eiffel Tower. Each Friday when he crossed the canal bridge and reached the Prater he would stand patiently in line before the pleasant young lady selling admission tickets to the wheel for little more than the cost of a beer.

There were abundant green spaces in which to stroll, but it was

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the amusement park and its new Ferris wheel that dominated the area. He would wander among the hundreds of structures on the Prater grounds, exploring the tents and stalls and taverns that sold everything from beer and wine to ice cream, coffee, and pastries. It was in the Prater dance halls that the waltz had become the rage of Europe during the Congress of Vienna nearly ninety years earlier, and that was where Lustig and Lisa learned to dance it much later during their courting days.

Most of Edward D. Hoch's stories for *EQMM* are series works, so we received his latest offering with special pleasure. The Vienna of 1897, when the Prater Ferris Wheel was new, is his setting; a retired policeman (perhaps reminiscent of his series character Leopold) is the protagonist. As always, the puzzle is complex and the research impeccable. ✝

Occasionally he would even take a ride on the merry-go-round, but always it was the wheel that drew him. Some 200 feet in diameter, constructed of huge steel girders held in place by 120 spokes of steel cable, it moved at about two and a half feet per second. Its thirty red wooden cabins swinging gently from their supports seemed like foreshortened railway coaches, each bearing a number.

Lustig had soon discovered he was not the only one who made a routine of Friday visits to the Ferris wheel. There was the woman in the hooded cape who regularly fed the pigeons, and the old man (older than Lustig!) who came to sit on one of the benches until the ticket office opened for business. There were young people, too, especially the romantic couple who met there, apparently on their lunch hour, to share food from a paper bag. He was never sure of their names, though once he'd heard the young man call out in English to the blond woman, "Magdalen! Over here, Magdalen!"

These four plus Lustig were in the habit of getting into cabin number thirty at one o'clock each Friday afternoon. Often they were the only passengers, though each cabin could hold twenty people. Perhaps the number was lucky for them, or perhaps, like Lustig, they chose it as the least crowded cabin, since passengers were loaded starting with number one.

The city from more than two hundred feet up was a thing of rare beauty. The old man, whose name was Fritz Kralik, told the others of coming here at night during the opening week, seeing the beauty of Vienna in the scattered sections of the city where electricity had been installed. The young couple, obviously lovers, said very little, hugging each other tightly as the swaying car began its ascent. One complete revolution took ten minutes once all the cabins were loaded. Since they were enclosed, the Ferris wheel was

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expected to operate every day, rain or shine.

The woman who'd been feeding the pigeons turned to Lustig one day and said, "I see you here often on Fridays. Are you retired?" She was younger than him, probably still in her early fifties, and quite attractive now that she'd pushed back the hood of her cape. Her name was Mina.

"Yes, from the police department."

"Oh! How interesting!"

With a boyish smile on his lips, Oswald Lustig settled back to enjoy the ride.

The following Friday, a chilly October morning, Lustig awoke and dressed with a certain unease. Neighbors had reported a prowler in their building the previous evening, while he was out to dinner, and he'd found scratch marks around the lock of his door. Nothing seemed to be missing, but he planned to mention it when paying his usual visit to police headquarters. Before he could do so, Captain Hesse waved him into his office. Hesse was a slender man of military bearing, in his early forties, who'd risen quickly in the department. When off duty, he was something of a dandy, attending the State Opera or dining at the Sophienbad in evening clothes complete with top hat and a gold-headed cane, usually in the company of attractive young women. Even in the office he kept an open box of bonbons for visitors, and Lustig occasionally took one. "You may be able to help us with a case," he said casually. "You mentioned once that you sometimes go over to the Prater and ride the new Ferris wheel on Friday afternoons."

"Almost every week," Lustig acknowledged. "That wheel has enriched the life of our city."

"Do you see the same people?"

"Some," he admitted. "Why do you ask?"

Captain Hesse sighed. "There's been a murder. Both the victim and her killer seem to be linked to the Prater Ferris wheel." He reached into his desk and took out an envelope. Opening it, he let the contents slide onto the top of the desk. It was a torn admission ticket to the Prater Ferris wheel. The number 30 had been written across the face of it.

"Where did you find this?" he asked the captain.

"Clutched in the victim's right hand, along with a torn piece of cloth." He produced the cloth next, a ragged dark-blue triangle that he tried unsuccessfully to square up with the edges of his desk. Hesse had always been a meticulous man.

"Tell me about it," Lustig suggested.

"The body of a young woman, Karen Kritzer, was found yesterday morning in her apartment about two blocks from the entrance to the Prater. It's difficult to place the exact time of death, but we believe

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she was probably killed on Tuesday evening. The landlady hadn't seen her since then, and she didn't report for work Wednesday. Interestingly enough, she was a ticket seller at the Prater Ferris wheel. She was beaten to death, but we haven't found the weapon."

"The ticket might have come from her own pocket," Lustig pointed out.

Captain Hesse shook his head. "We already checked that. The man who loads the cabins actually rips them in two as people board. Of course we questioned him. His name is Helmet Scrole."

"I know Helmet," Lustig told him.

The captain nodded. "He described a retired police investigator who came on Fridays. I thought it might be you. Did you know Karen Kritzer?"

"I would have known her by sight but not by name."

"Or any of the other regulars?"

Lustig mentioned the woman who fed the pigeons, and the young couple who ate lunch together. "There's an old man named Kralik, too. I don't know the names of the others, but the woman who feeds the birds is named Mina. I've spoken with her."

"Will you be going there now?"

"I expect so. The day is chilly, but I ride the horsecar part of the way."

"Keep an eye out for someone with a torn pocket."

"I'll do that, Captain."

"And take this ticket with you. It might help."

The idea that one of his fellow passengers on the Ferris wheel might be involved in the killing was beyond Lustig's belief. In fact, he hardly believed the fact of the young woman's death until he arrived at the Prater that afternoon. Someone new, a middle-aged woman he'd never seen before, was selling tickets at the Ferris wheel.

"Where's the young lady who usually works here?" he asked.

"She was killed."

"What happened?"

"I don't know anything," the woman responded, grim-lipped.

He saw Mina tossing seed to the pigeons and walked over to join her. She smiled and greeted him. "I see the cooler weather has not kept you away."

"Nor the others," he said, gesturing toward the line of people already waiting for the first ride. The Ferris wheel continued to be a prime attraction months after its opening. "Did you notice there's a new woman selling tickets in the booth?"

Mina shook her head. "I don't talk to them. I just buy my ticket."

His wandering eyes were attracted to a man who stood in line, near the front. Middle-aged, balding, without a hat. Where had Lustig seen him before? Then Fritz Kralik appeared, with his old

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man's pace, head down as if searching for a lost coin. The balding man in line looked away.

"Over here, Fritz," Lustig called. "I've saved you a place."

"Thank you, sir!" The old man shivered a bit. "The dampness almost kept me away today."

Helmet Scrole had come forward to tear the tickets and direct people to their cabins. Each cabin had fourteen windows, spaced along the sides and ends, giving a panoramic view of the city and the river. When all thirty cabins were filled to capacity some 600 people could ride the wheel at one time. Today it was less than half full, but Lustig and the others still waited for number thirty, the final cabin.

"The world will never see the likes of this again," Mina said as the cabin swayed gently and began to rise. "In Paris, the Eiffel Tower just sits there."

Old Fritz Kralik, who liked to correct people, quickly said, "The original wheel built by Ferris in Chicago four years ago could hold more than two thousand people, and the ones in London and Blackpool are taller than this."

"Ah, but can you see the Danube from them?" she countered.

Lustig wondered what had happened to the young couple who usually joined them on Fridays. There were only the three of them in the cabin today. But the thought left his mind as the swaying cabin approached the top of its arc. Looking out at his city he could see the tower of St. Stefan's Cathedral, and far away to the southeast he could even make out Schönbrunn, the eighteenth-century Habsburg palace. "Every day is different here," he said in admiration. "I wait for the winter when snow and fog will add a special beauty."

"They may not open the wheel then," Kralik pointed out. "It might be dangerous with the weight of the snow added to a full load of passengers."

But Mina was staring at Lustig. "I can't believe you were once a policeman. You are a man with a sensitive soul."

He smiled, pleased but embarrassed by her words.

The cabin of the Ferris wheel had reached the top and started down. It would make another complete circle before it started unloading passengers and bringing them on board for the next ride. Sometimes Lustig bought more than one ticket so he could remain on the wheel, but when he reached into his pocket all he found were torn stubs. Two of them. He remembered that Hesse had given him the ticket stub found in Karen Kritzer's dead hand.

Lustig studied the ticket again and noticed something new. Following the *30,* written very faintly, was the word *Horl.* There was a Horl-Gasse in Vienna, a street just a few blocks from the Ring that circled the city's main area. The 30 was not the number of the cabin they rode in but an address on Horl-Gasse. Mina and old

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Kralik decided to ride again, but Lustig left the wheel when his cabin was unloaded and headed for the park's exit. He noticed that the balding man left, too.

The address he sought was back to the west, beyond the police department, so Lustig retraced his steps, boarding a horsecar for the final portion of the journey along the brick streets of the city. Vienna had grown and prospered with a period of rapid economic expansion as the new century approached. Carriages and horsecars filled the wide avenues of the Ring, and customers crowded the shops. The Vienna Opera, newly under the direction of Gustav Mahler, was more popular than ever. As a member of the city's police, Lustig had been part of it all. Now he felt like an outsider, especially since his retirement and Lisa's death.

When he reached Number 30 Horl-Gasse, Lustig saw that it was an unexceptional apartment house on a street of similar older buildings. Lustig entered the tiny, shadowy lobby and looked over the list of tenants, but none of the names seemed familiar. Then he noticed something by one name, a spot of red like paint or blood. He wiped his finger across it, but it was dried.

Magdalen Suter.

In a sudden flash of memory he recalled the young man at the Ferris wheel calling to his girlfriend, "Magdalen! Over here, Magdalen!"

He rang the bell for the third-floor apartment and started up the curving staircase. For a moment he expected her to appear on the landing above him. When she didn't, he hesitated as he reached the door. If she was out, he'd made the trip for nothing. Then he noticed the door wasn't quite closed. It was standing open a fraction of an inch, and he knew he didn't want to see what was on the other side.

The first thing to catch his eye was the bloody hammer in the center of the sitting-room rug, almost as if it had been carefully positioned there. Her body was off to one side, in front of the apartment's fireplace. A fire started in it had died before fully igniting the logs, and the place was chilly as a result. He knelt to make sure the young woman was dead, then straightened up slowly. He'd seen enough bodies to make a rough estimate that Magdalen Suter had been dead since early morning, over six hours judging by the extent of rigor mortis.

The apartment was not equipped with one of the new telephones, so there was no way he could call for help. He left the door ajar, as he'd found it, and hurried downstairs to the street. It was the balding man who stopped his flight a few steps from the door. "Just a moment, sir," he said.

Lustig tried to push his way past him. "I've seen you before today. Have you been following me?"

The man ignored the question and asked one of his own. "May I

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ask what you were doing in this building?"

Lustig sighed in exasperation. "I'm a retired police officer. My name is Oswald Lustig."

There was a flash of the badge he knew so well. "Detective Danzig. I'm investigating the murder of the woman from the Prater. You frequent the Ferris wheel where she sold tickets."

"Yes, but I'm hardly a suspect! Look here, there's a woman's body in this building. I was trying to find a police officer."

The man named Danzig took a deep breath. "You'd better show me, sir."

Lustig had sat in the little room with the hissing radiator many times during his career, questioning people about every imaginable crime. Sometimes with a particularly difficult suspect, especially one with a prior criminal record, he would even have them taken to the basement room. He never went down himself, though, and preferred not to know about the questioning that occurred there.

Now, for the first time, he sat on the other side of the table. When Captain Hesse entered the little room he stood up and held out his hand. Hesse ignored it and said, "I'm sorry about this, Lustig. Do you have anything you wish to tell me?"

The radiator hissed. "About what, Captain?"

"About the killing of this woman Magdalen Suter. And about the previous killing of Karen Kritzer."

"I've told your man Danzig everything I know. It was that torn ticket from the first victim's hand. The number thirty was part of an address. The street name was written faintly. I went to the address and recognized Magdalen's name. There was a spot of something, perhaps blood, next to the name on the bell downstairs. When no one answered the bell, I went upstairs and found the apartment door ajar. Her body was inside."

"You knew this woman?"

"Only from the Prater. We would nod or say hello to each other. She was always with her boyfriend. I knew her name because I'd heard him call her that."

"Detective Danzig reported he encountered you fleeing the scene."

"I was searching for a police officer. I saw no telephone in the apartment. And Danzig didn't encounter me. He was following me. I saw him at the Prater earlier."

Captain Hesse sighed. "He was acting on my orders. We were investigating everyone who had contact with the murdered woman. Now we have a second victim who also has ties to the Ferris wheel, and you are at the scene."

"You must know she was dead hours before I found her."

"But you might have returned to the crime scene, Lustig."

"I had nothing to do with either killing," he told the captain,

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growing impatient. "What about the young man Magdalen met each Friday at the Prater? Have you questioned him?"

"No one seems to know his name."

Lustig's anger was growing. "Search her room for letters! Talk to her neighbors! Do something, for God's sake! What about the hammer? Is it the same weapon used on the first victim?"

"We can't be certain, though the wound is in the same area of the skull. I fear he'll kill again if not apprehended."

Lustig allowed himself a slight smile. "Like that Englishman? That Jack the Ripper?"

Hesse was dead serious. "It could happen in Vienna as easily as London."

Lustig stood up again. "I see no object in continuing this conversation. Unless you wish to arrest me and charge me with these crimes, I must be leaving now."

"You are free to go. I only ask that you contact me personally if you learn anything about these killings. You were always a good detective."

Lustig glared at him. "Will Danzig still be assigned to follow me?"

"With this second murder I have given Danzig new duties."

When Lustig left the police department he hurried back to the Prater. Though it was late afternoon he was hoping some of the regulars would still be at the Ferris wheel. He was in luck. The first one he spotted was Fritz Kralik and he made his way through the crowds to the old man.

"You've returned for another ride," Kralik said, obviously pleased to see him.

"I have to find someone. Have you seen the young man who often eats lunch with the blond woman?"

"Ah, yes! He was looking for her just a short time ago. He may be up on the wheel, trying to spot her in the crowd."

Lustig stared at the giant Ferris wheel with a sense of frustration. He could spend a quarter-hour waiting until it stopped and all the cabins were unloaded. Then suddenly he spotted the young man he sought, not on the wheel but over among the trees, seated on one of the park benches. He hurried over and introduced himself.

"Yes," the man said. He couldn't have been more than thirty, with dark eyes and a melancholy expression. "You often ride the wheel with us on Fridays, Mr. Lustig. My name is Reggie Swan. I'm English. The woman I meet here, Magdalen—have you seen her today?"

"I have," Lustig answered truthfully. "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you, sir." He told him as concisely as possible of Magdalen's fate.

Swan cried out in anguish and buried his head in his hands. He sat for some time like that. Finally, when he'd recovered himself a

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bit, he shook his head in despair and told Lustig, "It was her husband. Who else would have done such a thing?"

"Her husband?"

"A man named Klaus Suter. He was brutal to her and she left him back in the summer. He's made her life hell ever since. He followed her everywhere and became enraged if he saw her with another man. That was why we arranged secret meetings here at the Ferris wheel on her lunch hour."

"Where did she work?"

"At the confectionery shop near the park entrance."

Lustig thought for a moment and then asked, "Did you or Magdalen know the young woman who sold tickets to the Ferris rides? A woman named Karen Kritzer?"

"The one who was killed? Only by sight. You don't think the two deaths are related, do you?"

"I don't know," Lustig said, though he knew there had to be some relation when Magdalen's street address had been found written on the ticket clutched in Karen's hand. "You'd better go home now. There's no point in waiting around here."

But Reggie Swan continued to sit there alone. Lustig left him and headed for the confectionery shop, where he bought a box of bonbons. "Our own exclusive brand," the clerk told him. "I love them." She was barely out of her teens, with large, bright eyes, a striped blouse, and a wide gray skirt that hung to the floor. He realized it was the same color uniform the dead girl had worn on those lunch-hour trysts.

"I know," Lustig said with a smile as he accepted the wrapped box of chocolates. "I had some recently."

"You're a regular customer? Forgive me for not recognizing you. This is my first day on the job."

"You replaced Magdalen?"

She nodded. "She didn't come to work today. Do you know her?"

"Slightly."

The following morning's newspaper reported that police were detaining Klaus Suter in connection with the murder of his estranged wife Magdalen. Lustig read through the brief account twice before putting down the paper. There was no mention of the first killing.

By the following Friday, Suter had been formally charged with the murder. At headquarters that day Lustig asked Hesse about it. The captain shrugged and said simply, "He confessed."

"To both killings?"

"Just to hitting his estranged wife with the hammer. Apparently the two murders weren't related."

"Then the Suter case is closed?"

Captain Hesse nodded. "It's closed."

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At the Prater that day there was no sign of the Englishman, Reggie Swan. Lustig rode the wheel with Fritz Kralik and Mina. It was a pleasant day, but he couldn't stop thinking about the two dead women.

Some Fridays during that Vienna winter Lustig was unable to keep up his routine visits to the Ferris wheel. When an influenza-like illness laid him low for two weeks in January, Mina even appeared at his apartment one day to see what had happened to him. No one ever talked of Karen Kritzer's murder. Magdalen Suter's husband had been sent off to prison for her killing, even after recanting his confession. The police had beaten it out of him, he insisted, and Lustig knew it could have happened that way.

With the coming of spring, crowds again returned to the Prater. A woman named Marie Kindl, a professional circus performer, was hired to help promote the new Ferris wheel. She would hang by her teeth from a cable attached to one of the cabins as the wheel revolved. The stunt was scheduled for a Sunday afternoon to attract the most people, and Lustig decided to attend. In retirement, his life had become inexorably entwined with that great wheel in the sky, visible from every part of the city. Even on his regular Friday visits he often ended the day by inviting Mina to join him at a *Kaffehauser* for coffee and a pastry.

For this day, being a Sunday, he decided to wear a dark blue suit that had been in his closet since the previous summer. He took it out on its hanger and held it up to the light. That was when he noticed the torn pocket on the suitcoat. A triangular piece of fabric was actually missing from it. He sat holding the coat for some time, staring at it.

The Prater was crowded when he finally arrived there, wearing an older suit that was a bit tight on him. Lisa had wanted him to dispose of it, but he was glad now that he had kept it, buried away at the back of the closet. When Mina saw him coming, at the entrance where they often met, she exclaimed, "You have a new suit!"

"No, only a very old one."

She took his arm as they made their way past the rows of stalls, drifting with the crowd toward the main attraction. "You know who I saw not ten minutes ago? That Englishman, Swan. He told me it's the first time he's been back here since Magdalen's death."

Lustig nodded. "Many people are probably coming for the first time this year."

As they neared the Ferris wheel, they saw old Kralik dozing on one of the benches. Mina woke him with a tap on the shoulder. "Come with us, old man, or you will miss the performance. Then Mr. Lustig is taking me for a ride on the wheel."

He smiled up at them. "I come here on a Sunday to see a circus

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performer! Soon I will be living here like a Gypsy in a tent!"

"There are worse places," Mina assured him.

The three of them proceeded to the open area before the great wheel. The best view of Marie Kindl's performance would be from the ground, so no customers were riding inside at present. Marie arrived on schedule, dressed in her circus costume and accompanied by a Prater dignitary who introduced her with great fanfare. A cable was lowered from one of the cabins to where she stood. After testing it to make certain it would support her weight, she attached a leather bit to the end of the cable. Then, opening her mouth wide, she took the leather between her teeth and signaled the operator to start the wheel.

"That's quite a stunt, isn't it?" someone said from Lustig's side. He half turned his head to see Captain Hesse standing there in civilian clothes, carrying his gold-headed walking stick.

"Indeed," Lustig agreed. "I never knew you came to the Prater Wheel, Captain."

"This is something that should not be missed."

They watched as the Ferris wheel began to rise, lifting the young woman with it. She kept her arms at her sides, face to the sky. Knowing it took ten minutes for the wheel to complete its circuit, Lustig wondered if she'd be able to hang on that long. "Strong teeth," Mina commented. "I wouldn't want to try that with my dentures."

Lustig agreed. "Ten minutes is a long time." He stepped to the other side of Captain Hesse, where the others could not hear him above the noise of the crowd. "Sometimes women die much quicker than that, don't they, Captain?"

Hesse turned a smiling face toward him. "What do you mean?"

"Karen Kritzer and Magdalen Suter. Are you really going to let Suter's husband rot in prison for your crime?"

While the wheel turned and the crowd held its collective breath, Lustig and Hesse were walking away, toward the Danube Canal. Captain Hesse swung his gold-headed cane in the air like the dandy he was, and Lustig talked on, telling his former superior how he'd happened to solve the crimes.

"It was a mistake, you know, trying to frame me for it. Why me? I suppose it was because you knew I came to the Prater every Friday. I had contact with Karen Kritzer when I bought my ticket from her, even though I barely noticed her. If you framed me, you could immediately establish the connection between us as part of your so-called evidence. But why did you kill her?"

Hesse shook his head. "You have always been a smart detective, Lustig. I should not have underestimated you. As for the killing, it was just something that happened. I didn't mean to kill her. I'd met her here at the Prater, selling her tickets to the Ferris wheel.

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I went up to her apartment that night and we argued. She wanted money or she'd say I tried to rape her. It would have ruined my chances for promotion, perhaps even cost me my job. I struck out at her, hitting her with this cane. It was an accident."

"What followed wasn't."

"No," he admitted.

"You picked the lock on my apartment and got into my closet. You ripped a piece of cloth from the pocket of one of my suits, then returned to the dead girl's apartment and left it in her hand as a clue. You also left a ticket stub from the Ferris wheel, with an address scrawled faintly upon it. To make sure I'd see that address you even gave me the ticket stub, an important piece of evidence. What police captain would ever do that, hand over evidence to a retired detective?"

"I needed to get you to that address," Hesse admitted. They'd reached the canal now and were walking along the footpath.

"Of course you did, because Magdalen's dead body would be there, waiting for me, her name even marked with a drop of blood so I wouldn't miss it. You killed her early Friday morning. The hammer that you used was there, too, so it would appear to be the same weapon that killed Karen. You didn't want anyone thinking about a gold-headed cane. You assigned Danzig to follow me, and he was supposed to find me with the body. This was where you made your only mistake. You left her body in front of the fireplace and started a fire in it, so the heat would slow rigor mortis and make it appear she was killed more recently. But the fire went out before the main logs ignited. I was found at the scene but it meant nothing when the autopsy showed she was killed more than six hours earlier."

"There is nothing to connect me with Magdalen Suter."

"Except that she too worked at the Prater, in a confectionery shop that sells an exclusive brand of bonbons. I recognized them because I'd eaten one recently from the box you kept on your office desk."

"Her case is closed. Klaus Suter confessed to the crime."

"After you beat it out of him in the basement. I worked for you, remember? And now I want him freed."

Captain Hesse turned to him with a look of triumph. "Oh, haven't you heard? Klaus Suter hanged himself in his cell last night. If your motive was to free him you are too late."

Lustig saw the gold-headed cane coming up then and waited no longer. He grabbed the cane and gave Hesse a hard shove that sent him off the path and into the canal. If there were any sounds or shouts they went unheard over the thunderous roar of the Prater crowd. Marie Kindl was safely back on the ground.

Lustig waited a moment and tossed the cane into the canal. Then he turned and hurried back to meet Mina. He still owed her a ride on the Ferris wheel. ●

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The Christmas-Tree Farm

by Scott Mackay

Graham McLesky tried opening the crawlspace door in the second bedroom, but much to his dismay, the crawlspace door was painted shut. Had his grandfather done that? He tried to be cheerful about it, tried to think of a joke he could tell about the crawlspace door on his morning show—it was always smile your morning away with Graham McLesky—but he couldn't think of any jokes right now; all he could think of was how he was in the room his grandfather had been murdered in, how his wife couldn't have a baby, how in two weeks the Graham McLesky Morning Show would make its last broadcast, and how after the last show aired he was going to have to live in cheaper digs.

From downstairs he heard Lucy scrubbing the kitchen cupboards. Already the loneliness of the place was getting to him. He opened the shade, an old spring-loaded one, let it go, watched it snap open like a player-piano roll out of control, and looked out at the Christmas-tree farm. Another of his grandfather's failed money-making schemes. Most of the trees were tall now, many at least thirty-five years old, a testament to his grandfather's penchant for chronic disaster. Thirty years ago, the trees had been a lot smaller. But nobody ever came. In December, with the snow deep, the fields remained empty, no customers, and the trees grew and grew.

Scott Mackay is a winner of Canada's Arthur Ellis award in both the novel and short story categories. So versatile is he that in 2001 he had novels published in two genres: *Fall Guy: A Barry Gilbert Mystery* was released by St. Martin's Press in August, and *The Meek*, a science fiction novel, appeared from Penguin-Roc in April. A new Barry Gilbert short story will appear in *EQMM* 3/02.

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He turned around, looked at the room. Small. Might do as a study. His grandmother was ninety-one, lived in Ascot Meadows Lodge now, and the farmhouse had been closed up for six years. It had that closed-up smell, the smell of dust, regret, and sad memories.

He pondered the problem of the door. Their apartment in New York was a lot bigger than this entire two-story farmhouse. He would have to get that door open somehow. They had so much junk, they needed this space for storage.

He went downstairs to get a crowbar, a paint scraper, and a utility knife. His wife was up on a stepladder scrubbing the fly-spotted shelves with a Brillo pad. He looked at the magazine article she had open on the kitchen table, one on stress and pregnancy. She wasn't giving up. She turned. She stopped scrubbing. She saw him looking at the article. He quickly looked away, fished through his toolbox for the tools.

"Don't be like that," she said.

"It's hopeless," he said.

"It's not hopeless," she said. "It's never hopeless."

"Have you seen the utility knife?" he asked.

"You should read that article," she said. She pointed out the window toward the Christmas trees. "This is just what we need. All this fresh air. No stress."

"Except every time I come here I feel like I'm walking into a crypt."

"You should forget about that," she said.

"It just bugs me that they never found the guy," he said. "And it bugs me that it happened on New Year's Day. Why did it have to happen on New Year's Day? I hate working in that room. I'm not sure I even want to use that room."

She shrugged. "We'll paint the room," she said. "We'll change it. Don't worry so much. It'll be fine."

He found the utility knife and the other tools, and went back up to the second bedroom, thankful for his wife. Lucy was the reason he could talk nonstop for three hours every weekday morning without letting a single sour note creep into his voice. She was the reason he could actually come to this old place, where the memories were thick and the ghosts were all around.

He kneeled by the crawlspace door, scored a line between the door and the jamb with the utility knife, positioned the paint scraper edge-on, gave it a little tap with the round part of the crowbar, and broke the seal. He did this all the way down. Then he tried pulling the door open. The door was still stuck. He jammed the crowbar in and tried to lever the door open. He didn't want to damage the door but he didn't see how he was going to avoid it. He applied more pressure. The door popped open.

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The air inside the crawlspace smelled dead. He stuck his head in and looked up and down the small triangular space. He saw a box full of old photograph albums. He saw a small leather suitcase way at the back. He crawled in, careful of the rusty nails sticking out of the roof—he would have to hammer those down.

He pulled a photograph album out of the box, opened it randomly, and . . . and . . . there he was, two years old, 1961, standing on the seat of his grandfather's old tractor, his grandfather smiling up at him, propping him up with his hand. Turned to another page, found yet other old photographs, one of his grandfather kneeling, planting a seedling Christmas tree with all the kindness, patience, and hope he was known for; another of the ducks out on the pond; another of Graham and his brother Taylor standing next to his grandfather's two Dalmatians by the chicken coop.

He put the album in the box and crawled toward the suitcase way at the back.

The suitcase was old, fake alligator leather dyed olive green, had a Vote-for-George-McGovern sticker on it. He tried the snaps. The snaps popped open. He lifted the lid and saw what he first thought were gray-green blocks of wood, badly spotted with black dots of mildew; but looking more closely, through the mildew, he saw the all-too-distinctive patterns, the official signifiers of the almighty greenback, the country's liquid tool of commerce: money, stacks upon stacks of twenty-dollar bills still wrapped in their bank straps, the straps faded and yellow, looking as brittle as old masking tape. He lifted one of the bundles out, aware, suddenly, of how uncomfortably hot the air in the crawlspace was, looked at the bundle edgewise, estimated that there had to be a hundred bills in the bundle, gripped the edge of it with his thumb and fluttered the bills like a deck of cards so that the distinctive smell of money drifted like a hypnotic vapor into the air. He placed the bundle of bills back into the suitcase. He wondered who had ever had the nerve to vote for McGovern in his staunchly Republican family. He closed the lid and just sat there in the heat, in the dust, in the stillness of the scene of the crime twenty-seven years after, and wondered what he was going to do about this unexpected discovery.

Two hundred thousand dollars in all, now on the coffee table in the living room, the outside bills mildewed, the rest of them crisp, fresh, never circulated. Why would his grandfather hide all this money in that crawlspace? And did it have anything to do with his murder? Here was a godsend, the money the old man could have used to break free from his chain of business disasters—the stationery business, the auto garage, the Christmas-tree farm. And what had he done with it? Put it in the crawlspace and painted

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the crawlspace door shut. So typical of Lorne, it made Graham want to cry.

"I'm going to make some lemonade," said Lucy.

He didn't like to think of his grandfather's murder. Lucy went to the kitchen and made lemonade. He always got a lump in his throat whenever he thought of his grandfather's murder.

"I wonder if Nana knows anything about it?" he called.

He heard Lucy crack a dozen ice cubes into the glass pitcher out in the kitchen. "I'm just surprised it's been sitting there all this time," she called back. "No one bothered looking in that crawlspace for twenty-seven years?"

"My grandmother locked that room five days after the funeral," he said, surprised by how flat his voice sounded. He gazed at the George McGovern sticker on the suitcase, done up like Fourth-of-July bunting. "That room was spoiled for her." Fourteen years old, New Year's Day, 1973, Mom getting a call at six in the morning; a call at six in the morning on New Year's Day, you knew it had to be bad. "My mother said Lorne's murder was badly investigated." Like why would the police bother checking the crawlspace if the crawlspace door was painted shut? "The sheriff was a drunk." Three large-caliber rounds through the head, ma'am, we're sorry, ma'am, this must come as a terrible shock. A goddamn Happy New Year, his mother had bawled—one of the few times he had ever heard her swear.

Lucy came out with the lemonade and glasses. "Do you think we should turn the money in?" she asked.

He looked up, disoriented, out of step. "Maybe I should drive over to the lodge and see if Nana knows anything about it first," he said.

The Ascot Meadows retirement home stood back from the road on a heavily wooded hillside, not a meadow in sight, new, made of yellow bricks, with thermal windows, separate apartments, and a bowling green that was constantly pitted by acorns. Graham walked toward his grandmother's apartment. The hall had railings. A few wheelchairs stood parked here and there.

His grandmother's door was ajar. He peered inside.

His grandmother sat on the old sofa he remembered so well from the farmhouse. Her twenty-seven-inch Sony blasted away, but she wasn't watching it; she was dozing. She was an exceedingly small, shrunken woman with a penumbra of blue-rinsed hair around her bony face. She wore a blue cardigan and red slacks. He pushed his way in. She wore a brooch—*the* brooch—the one he had given to her for Christmas when he'd been nine, a gold cherub holding a silver flower. He stared at her, wondering how much longer she would hold on, what it was like to be that old, to have

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been born before the First World War. She must have sensed him because she opened her eyes and turned.

"Taylor?" she said in a loud voice, the voice of a deaf woman.

"No, Nana, it's me, Graham."

She insisted on thinking he was Taylor. "How are the children, dear?" she asked.

He didn't bother to correct her, just got right down to what he had to say to her. "Lucy and I are moving into the farmhouse next week," he said.

This seemed to jog something. She put her gnarled hand on his wrist and chuckled deprecatingly. "I'm sorry, Graham," she said. "I thought you were Taylor."

"That's all right, Nana," he said. "Lucy and I are moving in next week, and we're just out here cleaning things up a bit. I think Mom must have told you about it."

"She did, dear." His grandmother began to apologize. "I should have gone over there and done a little cleaning myself."

She kept forgetting that she was extremely unsteady on her feet, that she was essentially an invalid who had to be looked after by a nursing staff twenty-four hours a day, and that she could hardly see or hear anymore. But it was her way to apologize. After she finished apologizing for not cleaning up, she went off on a tangent about a man named Craig who had a car and who sometimes drove her around town, and took her to her hair appointments, and whose wife would occasionally invite her over to dinner and to watch TV. "But, oh, heavens, Graham," she said, "his wife is such a terrible cook. Every time I go over there and I have to eat something, it's just dreadful."

He nudged her back to topic. "Did Grandpa ever tell you anything about any money he might have left in the crawlspace upstairs?" he asked.

She stared at him through her thick glasses, mystified. "Your grandfather never had any money, dear," she said, correcting him, as if she were surprised he should forget this well-known fact. "He had to hire on as a mechanic down near New York, Mount Vernon I think it was, just so we could make ends meet."

"Nana, Lucy and I found some money in the crawlspace," he said. "I just want to know if you know anything about it. It was in a suitcase. A small green suitcase."

"Money?" she said. He still wasn't sure if she had the thread of it.

"Yes."

She shook her head. "Oh no, there was never any money in the house, dear," she said. "We never had any money. Any time we had any money Lorne would use it to start this or that. He always wanted his own business. We were always in debt." She shook her

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head at the memory. "I had so many creditors to deal with, even after he died. Ones I didn't even know about. It's just dreadful the way some people can behave sometimes."

He steered her back to topic yet again.

"Nana," he said, "we found the money in the crawlspace behind the second bedroom. It's quite a lot. Did Grandpa ever say anything about it? Was he ever involved in anything that might earn him a lot of money quickly, money he might want to hide?"

"I never went in that second bedroom after your grandfather died," she said.

"I know you didn't, Nana."

"Nobody did. I locked it up and nobody ever went in there again. It must smell musty by now. I'm sorry I didn't get over there to clean it up before you and the children got there."

He didn't bother to remind her that Taylor was the one with the children. He decided he would have to try a different tack.

"Nana, if Grandpa ever decided to hide money, why would he hide it? Do you think he would be hiding it from someone in particular, or would he be hiding it from everybody in general? You say you had creditors you didn't even know about after he died. Did Grandpa owe them a lot of money? Can you remember any of them? I know it was a long time ago, Nana, but this is important. Try and think."

She shook her head, bewildered. "He never had any money to hide, dear," she said. "When we moved out to Ascot, he sank every last penny into the farm."

"But say he wanted to hide some money," he said. "Did he ever say who he might want to hide it from? Or why he would want to hide it?"

She looked clearly confused by all this, like she couldn't trust herself to get any of it right. Then her eyes widened.

"Jack Medley, maybe," she said.

He paused; this was at least something. "Who's Jack Medley?" he asked.

"Your grandfather's lawyer," she said. "I never did like the man. Some people you just don't like and you can't explain why. He came around a few weeks after your grandfather died and told me Lorne owed him all sorts of money. I told him I didn't have any. He kept hounding me, came every few days. He got nastier and nastier until I finally told him that if he didn't stay away I'd have to phone the sheriff."

"And did he stay away?" asked Graham.

"He stayed away," she said.

"And is he still alive?" he asked.

"Far as I know, he is," she said. "He was a lot younger than your

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grandfather. He must be in his late seventies by now. His son runs the law office, I think. Out on Dixon Road."

The office of Medley and Son occupied an isolated wood-frame structure near the railway tracks on Dixon Road. Graham went there the next day. The parking lot stood out back, enough space for five vehicles. Two of the spots were taken, one by a Buick station wagon, the other by a thirty-year-old Rambler, a car in surprisingly good shape for its age. He eased in next to the Rambler and got out of his car. He had to walk through a weed-choked lot to get to the front of the building. As he walked along the narrow dirt path, hundreds of grasshoppers leapt out of the grass ahead of him.

The building was dilapidated. It looked like one of those jerry-built recruiting centers the military had erected during the Second World War. The flaking beige clapboard was dirty—Graham guessed the nearby trains were constantly kicking dust into the air, and that the dust was then settling onto the old clapboard structure.

He found a man inside, fiftyish, sitting at a desk behind a nameplate—Kevin Medley. The man was dressed in a tweed blazer, a blue dress shirt, and a blue tie. He had a phone pressed to his ear, was trying, by the sound of it, to explain and justify to a disgruntled client the disbursements on a local real estate deal. Kevin Medley raised his finger, urging Graham to wait. With a "That's correct, ma'am," a pause, and then a final "That's correct, ma'am," followed by a quick thank you and an even quicker goodbye, Kevin Medley was finally able to end his conversation. He put the phone down, stood up, and extended his hand.

"I'm Kevin Medley," he said. "What can I do for you?"

The two men shook hands.

"I'm here to see your father," said Graham. "I was talking to him on the phone earlier today. I'm Graham McLesky, Agnes Penney's grandson."

The change he saw in Kevin Medley's face was like a cloud moving in front of the sun. "Dad's in the back room right now," said Kevin. "He might be dozing. I'll go and check." Kevin Medley took a few steps toward the back room, stopped as if he was having second thoughts, then turned and looked at Graham with apprehensive eyes. "You're not going to tell him anything upsetting, are you? Agnes hasn't died or anything, has she?"

"No, Agnes is fine."

"Because I don't like Dad to have too much excitement these days. Not since his bypass. The doctor said he's got to take it easy."

"Just a few questions about the property," he said. "My wife and I are moving in next week."

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"Oh," said Kevin. "Well, that's okay, then."

Kevin went to the back room and returned a moment later.

"He's up," he said. Kevin had a knit in his brow, looked as if he was still wondering if he could trust Graham with his father, but finally shrugged. "I guess he's ready to see you."

"I won't take up much of his time," said Graham.

"I'll be out here if you need me," said Kevin.

Graham walked to the back room. The room was the color of creamed salmon, the paint old, faded, discolored by cigarette smoke near the top. A small television in the corner played an old *M*A*S*H* rerun. Jack Medley struggled to his feet. He was a tall but stout man, somewhere in his seventies, wore black-framed glasses, a plaid blazer, a paisley tie, and had his gray hair slicked back with copious amounts of hair gel.

"So you're Agnes Penney's grandson," he said, and shook Graham's hand with a surprisingly firm grip. "Sit down. Make yourself at home. What can I tell you about the property?"

Graham couldn't help noticing three pairs of mounted deer antlers on the wall. As well, there were seven framed hunting photographs, all of them of a much younger Jack Medley posing with his kills from various hunting trips, most of the photographs black and white, a few in the washed-out, untrue color film of the 1970s. Graham started talking about the property; this was more or less a feint. He thought it might be better to ease his way toward the subject of the money, introduce it, as it were, through a roundabout route. He asked Jack Medley how much his grandfather had paid for the Christmas-tree farm back in 1966, where exactly the property line ended, whether there were any old surveys around, who owned the farm before his grandfather, and so on and so forth. Jack Medley answered all these questions as well as he could.

"I take it you knew my grandfather fairly well," said Graham.

"Sure I knew him well," said Jack. "We went hunting together."

"My grandmother says my grandfather owed you some money."

Jack didn't speak for a moment. The color rose to his face, that unhealthy purple color people get when they have clogged arteries.

"He owed me some, yep," Jack finally said.

"A lot?"

"A fair bit."

"For what?"

Jack looked away. "For this and that."

"Lawyers' fees?"

"I don't really see that it's any of your business, son."

Graham nodded. "It's just that we've found a bit out at the farmhouse and we're trying to see if anybody knows anything about it."

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Jack paused again. "How much money?" he asked.

Graham leaned back in his chair and put his hands on his knees. "Enough so that I should be asking questions about it," he said.

Medley nodded. "Did you talk to Agnes about it?" he asked.

Graham sighed. "Sure," he said. "But it's tough getting through to Agnes these days."

"Because I imagine the money belongs to her and she just doesn't remember it. She hasn't been the same old gal since she had her stroke. I think what you should do is go talk to her again. She was always hiding money on Lorne, I know that much. Lorne never knew how to put any away. So maybe she stashed some and forgot about it."

Maybe, thought Graham. But it was unlikely his grandmother would forget two hundred thousand dollars. He had to conclude that Jack Medley, like his grandmother, didn't know anything about the money, either.

Later, when Lucy was making supper in the kitchen and the orange light of sunset slanted through the small windows on either side of the fireplace, and the smell of fresh paint and Mr. Clean hung in the air, Graham sat in one of the tarp-covered chairs and looked through the old photograph albums. He found a shot of his father overseas in the oldest album, one from Vietnam a few months after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, his father, a demolitions advisor, standing under a palm tree with some ARVN officers in early 1965 wearing jungle fatigues and a camouflage sun hat, grinning at the camera. He found an odd one of his grandfather, from 1943, standing with a wrench in his hand, wearing a uniform of sorts, standing in front of a tank, the tank's turret cannon rising above his head. Had his grandfather been in the army, then? He kept flipping. He found a picture of himself standing outside the farmhouse beside his grandfather's fish pond. Then another of a Christmas-tree truck packed with Christmas trees in 1967; another of his grandfather in 1970 sitting in his old pink wingback chair with a Benson and Hedges wedged between his fingers, some pine boughs decorating the mantelpiece behind him; another of Christmas dinner, 1972, his grandfather standing in front of the turkey, carving knife ready, smiling, sixty-four years old and a picture of health—too young to die, too well-loved to have just seven days left to live.

He turned the page and found some summer shots—they were always coming out here in the summer, getting away from the city's filth and heat. He and Taylor stood against his dad's old Dodge Monaco, arms crossed, pushing their biceps out to look like musclemen, hamming it up for the camera. Another of his grand-

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father's horse, Skeezix, an old brown nag, with Graham, ten years old, on its back wearing a Lone Ranger hat and mask, Taylor walking along beside, looking not too happy about the whole thing. He turned the page and stopped. Leaned forward to get a better look. His dad and mom, in happier days, June of 1971, standing on the farmhouse porch, his dad holding a suitcase, not just any suitcase, but *the* suitcase, the green imitation-alligator-leather suitcase with the George-McGovern-for-President sticker. That was his dad's suitcase?

"Lucy, come look at this," he called.

She came from the kitchen and looked at the photograph.

"Look at the suitcase," he said.

She looked. "That's your father?"

"Yes."

"And the suitcase belonged to him?"

Graham had no recollection of the suitcase. "I guess so," he said.

Graham kept the money locked in the trunk of his car. Lucy didn't pressure him about the money. It didn't matter that he was going to lose his job at the radio station and that he and Lucy didn't have much tucked away; she didn't want him spending any of it because she was beginning to think it might be illegitimate, ill-gotten gain. To spend it, especially if it were marked in any way, might get them into trouble. For Graham, this took some getting used to. As they drove back to the farmhouse after grocery shopping a few evenings later, Graham had to reconcile himself to the fact that Lucy might be right, that his grandfather might have been desperate enough—what with the failure of the Christmas-tree farm and his sundry other business ventures—to break the law.

"Why would he hide the money in the crawlspace if it were legally earned?" said Lucy. "Those are brand-new bills, and they're all wrapped in fresh bank wrappers. If you look at the serial numbers, they're all sequential, as if they're fresh out of a bank. I don't trust it, Graham."

Looked at this way, they should have turned the money in right away. But the pull of the stuff was too great for Graham. Two hundred thousand dollars! And the station about to cancel his contract.

When they got to the farmhouse, the front door was open.

"Did you leave the front door open?" he asked.

"No."

He took a deep breath, felt his shoulders tensing. "I think we've just been burgled, then," he said.

He took the flashlight from the glove compartment, went to the shed, found a crowbar, and mounted the steps to the porch. Lucy followed behind. He shone the flashlight into the Christmas trees,

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swept the beam around to the front yard, then along the drive to the road. No one. He turned around, reached inside, and switched on the hall light. He listened. He heard no one. He stepped cautiously inside.

Some of the tarp-covered furniture had been pushed aside. Two boxes of books had been tipped over on the floor. They moved into the dining room, then into the kitchen, and saw that some of the cupboards were open, that five quilted placemats had been shoved to the floor. Nothing valuable had been taken. The television was still there. So was all of Lucy's fine silver. His computer stood untouched on the desk in the corner of the living room. He was just about to go upstairs when he heard the roar of a car back by the barn.

He turned from the stairs and hurried out to the porch. A car raced from the barn, passed the side of the house, and sped down the drive to the road. Two mallards leapt into the moonlit sky from the duck pond and flew away. In the light of the moon he could make out what kind of car it was.

A thirty-year-old Rambler.

The same car he had seen parked behind Medley and Son, Attorneys at Law, on Dixon Road five days earlier.

He didn't call the police—he explained to Lucy about the Rambler—didn't want to call the authorities because the money in the suitcase looked more and more as if it might be ill-gotten gain, after all. He didn't want the police asking his grandmother questions because that would just end up making his grandmother miserable.

"Lorne will always be a saint to her," he told Lucy, "and I don't want anything to jeopardize that."

He couldn't sleep that night. He lay in bed looking out the window at the maple trees outside, watching them bend in the breeze, trying to reconcile himself to what his grandfather might or might not have done, to come to terms with what was quickly becoming the disillusioning reality of the whole business. A heist? A robbery? It didn't seem possible. He got so restless he got up and walked to the second bedroom, scene of his grandfather's murder all those many years ago. Was it a crime? And if so, what crime didn't end up hurting people? What crime didn't have its victims? That's what was so hard to take, that his grandfather would actually victimize someone to get money. It didn't seem like his grandfather at all. Had the desperation become too much for him? Had his grandfather, at the age of sixty-four, after watching all his dreams slip by one after the other, come to the conclusion that his only recourse was to break the law?

In the morning, the *Ascot Observer* ran a sad story, one that

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changed Graham's plans. Jack Medley, 79, a retired attorney, president of the local Hunt Club, had been found dead at the wheel of his car off Route 25, the same route Graham and Lucy lived on. Graham read the details with growing alarm. The car had gone off the road at a high rate of speed, had broken through a guard rail, and had landed in and amongst some bulrushes in a dried-up marsh. Preliminary evidence indicated that Medley had suffered a heart attack just before the accident. The paper ran a picture of Medley's dented thirty-year-old Rambler.

"I've got to talk to Kevin Medley about this," he told Lucy.

But first he gave Kevin a few days to look after the death of his father. He called on Friday night, and Kevin agreed to see him in the office the following afternoon.

Lucy wanted to go into town for a pregnancy test, so she came with him. She didn't trust the do-it-yourself pregnancy-test kits, preferred to let a professional lab do it, even if it meant waiting an extra day or two to get the result. Graham dropped her at the medical building, then drove to Medley and Son.

He found Kevin waiting for him, sad, drawn, but bearing up well under his grief.

"I'm sorry about your father," Graham said.

Kevin shrugged wearily. "With his heart the way it was, he was living on borrowed time anyway."

Graham looked away, wasn't sure how to begin, eased his way in with some small talk about the funeral, how it went, how many people showed up, but finally decided that he might as well get down to business.

"Your father burgled my house on Tuesday night," he said, and then explained about the circumstances, how he had talked to Jack about finding the money, and how he had seen the Rambler bolt down the driveway. "I thought you'd better know."

Kevin Medley stood up slowly after this, sighed, slid his hands into his back pockets, and walked around to the front of his desk, head bowed, as if he were deep in thought. He leaned against his desk, folded his arms in front of him, and gazed at Graham through his big square bifocals.

"I guess I'd better tell you, then," said Kevin, his voice resigned.

A knit came to Graham's brow. "Tell me what?" he asked.

"I've never told anyone—my father made me promise never to tell anyone—but I guess you have a right to know."

Graham felt suddenly uneasy. "A right to know what?"

Kevin gazed steadily at Graham. "My father was a sharpshooter in World War Two," he said, beginning whatever he wanted to tell Graham with an apparent non sequitur. "A sniper." Graham nodded, could only listen patiently as he tried to get used

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to the notion that here was yet another development, another turn in the whole mystifying matter of the money in the crawlspace. "My father and your father knew each other," said Kevin. "They were both veterans. Of different wars, true, but still brothers." Kevin took a deep breath, got his thoughts in order. "My father got himself into some bad business dealings during the late nineteen sixties, same as your father did. My father was dealing with people he never should have been dealing with, and he was the one who got your father involved with these same people. Jack met your father at a Veterans Association dinner here in town one summer, when you were about twelve. Since your dad and mom came out here a lot in summer, your dad got active with the veterans here in town." He nodded, more to himself than to Graham. "These people Jack and your dad owed money to, they weren't exactly legitimate. Jack and your dad had to figure out a way to pay them back, and pay them back fast." Kevin gave him a significant glance. "So they pooled their talents. Their military talents. And then they recruited your grandfather."

Graham felt heavy, like a sudden change of weather had just swept into the room. He was beginning to guess. And what he was guessing was something he didn't want to know.

"Your grandfather was a mechanic in the army for a while." Graham remembered the photograph, his grandfather with a wrench standing in front of a tank. "He was too young to fight in the First World War, too old to fight in the Second, so he worked on Sherman tanks and heavy armored trucks at the army depot near Buffalo, fixed the stuff during the war, repaired it whenever troops in Europe were able to send it back. After the war, he tried to start a number of different businesses but he couldn't make a go of it. You probably know all this." About the failed businesses, but not about the army. "No matter what he tried, it didn't work out. So he started working as a mechanic again in the late nineteen sixties, part-time, just to make ends meet. He was hired on by Mason and Mason, a garage in Mount Vernon specializing in heavy trucks and buses. They did a lot of work for various firms, had a major contract with UPS, another with Allied Van Lines, and another with Pinkerton, the armored-car company. Your grandfather did routine maintenance on armored cars. I don't know if Agnes ever told you."

"No, she never did."

"He got to know a lot of the crews, got to know their runs, had an inside track on all the information."

Graham felt even more uneasy. "So my father and your father got my grandfather involved."

"That's about the size of it. They got talking one day. They decided to have a try at one of these armored bank cars. They

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zeroed in on one route in particular. The crews were supposed to rotate routes for security purposes, but your grandfather knew this particular crew always went the same way, they were lazy about it. My dad told me all this about eight years after it happened. The three of them drove along this route and found the most isolated spot, in a valley between two towns."

"Your father told you this?"

Kevin nodded. "Eight or nine years after it happened. I was taking criminal law at the time, the heist was unsolved, in the cold files, but a new sheriff was thinking of taking another shot at it. My dad got scared. He came to me because he thought I might be able to tell him something that might make him feel better about the whole thing, explain some new defense to him I might have learned at law school for if and when he was ever arrested."

Kevin shook his head, smiling sadly at the memory.

Graham prodded him. "So the three of them got together and decided to rob this armored car," said Graham, feeling wearily resigned to the whole thing now.

Kevin nodded. "Your father devised a remote explosive device operated by a radio transmitter, much like the ones he taught the ARVN soldiers to use during the early part of the Vietnam War. It wasn't a large device. They didn't want to kill the guards. They wanted to disable the armored car at the appropriate moment. Your grandfather planted the device in the armored car while he was doing maintenance. When the armored car came along, your father detonated the device. The explosion stopped the truck cold. One of the guards got out. My father, from a distance of twenty-five yards, shot him in the leg. They didn't want to kill the guards. And with the way my dad shot they didn't have to. The guard went down. The other guard got out to help him. My father shot over this other guard's head. The guard went to his stomach. Your father went around to the back of the truck and blew the door open with some C-four. God knows where he got the stuff. The uninjured guard got up, drew his weapon, and went to investigate. My father squeezed off a round with the intent of disabling this second guard. But at the last moment, the guard crouched. Newspapers the next day said he died of a bullet wound to the chest, and described the heist as cold-blooded and professional."

Graham tried to think of words, but words at this point were beyond him. You think you knew someone. His father. His grandfather. You think you knew them and they turned out to be somebody different.

"So how did the money end up in the crawlspace at the farmhouse?" he asked.

Kevin stood up, scratched his head, then took another deep breath, as if the effort of telling this story were exhausting him.

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"I guess your grandfather hid it there without telling the other two," he said. "I can only speculate about that part, but the way my father told it, Lorne was going to set up a dummy company in New York to filter funds into a sister company in the Bahamas. From there, the sister company would arrange straight money transfers via Western Union into three numbered Manhattan accounts. My father helped with all the fake documentation. But Lorne couldn't go through with it after he realized they'd killed the guard."

Kevin looked away, shook his head.

"You see," he continued, "no one was supposed to die, and that's the part your grandfather simply couldn't live with. Jack and your father tried to convince Lorne that it was an accident, that there was nothing they could have done to prevent it, but your grandfather couldn't live with that, and he refused to go ahead with the money transfer. He insisted they turn themselves in. Your father said he was going to do something about that. Talk to your grandfather. Whether your father was the one who killed your grandfather, who can say, but he was certainly the last one to see Lorne alive. Your father and mother came out here that New Year's Eve to visit your grandparents. I don't know the exact circumstances, but the four of them were at a party somewhere with Jack, and the way Jack tells it, your grandfather wanted to go home early, wasn't feeling well, and got your father to take him home. Maybe they got to arguing about the heist. Maybe Lorne threatened to call the police. Or maybe your father just wanted to get his hands on the money. He came back later to get your mother and your grandmother, but Agnes wanted to stay late, help clean up, that's the way she is. So your mom and dad drove straight to Manhattan. Your grandmother discovered Lorne in the second bedroom later that morning when she got home from the party."

Kevin walked with preoccupied steps over to the table in the waiting area and lifted one of the old magazines from the table. He stared at the magazine. Graham had a memory, New Year's Eve, December nineteen seventy-three, a year after his grandfather's death: he was fifteen years old, arriving at a New Year's party late, barely an hour before midnight, wearing the blue corduroy blazer he'd worn to his grandfather's funeral the year before. Tried to dance but had had no heart for it. Wanted to go home early, just wasn't up to it. Went to the basement bedroom and dug under the coats on the bed. Left the party without telling anyone. Sad about his grandfather. Was walking home alone when the New Year struck.

"Your father had a good alibi, told police he was nowhere near the farmhouse when Lorne was killed, that he was downtown

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picking up your mother and grandmother. As I said, your grandmother wanted to stay."

He now remembered the actual funeral, the oblong hole, the walnut casket, the minister, his mother and grandmother holding each other, the creak of the pulleys as they lowered the casket, the sleek funeral-home limousines nearby, a desolate January flurry or two drifting down through the maple trees.

"So you think my father killed my grandfather?" he asked.

"He was certainly the last one to see your grandfather alive, Graham."

He remembered his father in the mid seventies, morose, out-of-sorts, bitter against everything. And now maybe the reason was finally clear. His father finally leaving, moving West, sending cards whenever he remembered, building his own life away from them.

"What do you think I should do with the money?"

Kevin's face creased with uncertainty and he rubbed his chin with his hand. "If you turn that money over, you're going to cause a lot of damage," he said. Graham pictured his grandfather painting the crawlspace door shut. "Your grandmother would be devastated, and my practice would be ruined. My father's reputation means a lot to this practice." Graham imagined Jack Medley on one knee in the woods, aiming for a leg shot, pulling his eye quickly away from the scope when he realized he'd hit the man in the chest. "The authorities would have to track down your father." Thought of his dad with a pat of C-four. Then thought of himself up on the tractor, held there by his grandfather's strong, sure arm. "Not only that, your mother would have to live with it all." Saw the Christmas trees and the big orange sun sinking down behind them. "I really don't know whether it's worth it, Graham. Sometimes justice is better left to sleep. I wish that poor boy in the armored car never had to die, but he did, and there's nothing we can do about it now. If I were you, I'd just get rid of the money somehow. Any move to spend it or turn it over would just cause a lot of pain for everybody concerned, yourself included."

He made his last radio broadcast two days later.

He drove from Manhattan to Ascot. The evening was clear. The country air had done him and Lucy good. He was beginning to think that living out here on the Christmas-tree farm, with the smell of pine and spruce all around, was the best thing they had ever done. Wonder of wonders, Lucy's pregnancy test had come back positive! They were going to be parents.

He stopped at the 7-Eleven, picked up some marshmallows, hot dogs, and hot-dog buns. He drove the rest of the way to the farmhouse in a state of mild elation.

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He turned up the drive. The sun was just going down and the Christmas trees were blue against the golden sky. He drove round to the back where Lucy was getting ready for the bonfire. He got out and made a big fuss over her, made her sit down, told her he would do everything, and that she shouldn't strain herself too much. She protested, halfheartedly, but actually enjoyed the attention.

By the time they had the bonfire going, the first stars were out. They didn't have much money, and he had no job, but neither of these things seemed to matter now that they were living out on the Christmas-tree farm and Lucy was going to have a baby. They roasted wieners. They drank Freshie, no wine, she was pregnant now. They roasted marshmallows. Graham turned to Lucy.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

She nodded. "Let's do it," she said.

Graham walked to the car and got the suitcase. He came back to the fire and opened it. Two hundred thousand dollars. Enough to give them financial security for a long time. Enough to raise a new child. But as far as Graham was concerned, the money was useless, a representation of his grandfather's one lapse, and of his father's horrendous crime. He lifted the first bundle out and ripped away the bank strap. He tossed the bills into the flames, two thousand dollars just like that—gone, *poof,* destroyed.

For the next fifteen minutes he and Lucy tossed money into the bonfire.

When they were done, a final large cinder—the remains of a twenty-dollar bill—floated high into the sky and drifted over the topmost branches of the Christmas trees. He watched it drift away, growing dimmer and dimmer until it finally darkened to an inert piece of ash. Then he looked at the Christmas trees. Symbol of his grandfather's final failure? No. If nothing else, the Christmas-tree farm was a beautiful spectacle to behold. He remembered Christmas of '72, his grandfather's last Christmas, walking through the trees, his grandfather pointing out the ones that were too big to cut down. "But you know, Graham," he had said. "I don't care. I like them anyway. I like them big, I like them small, I like all kinds of them." Not a failure at all.

"Are you okay?" Lucy asked.

He nodded. "I'm fine," he said.

No, not a failure. In fact, a great success. A symbol of his grandfather's patience, kindness, and hope. Something Graham would be able to see every day from now on. ●

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PEACE ON COOLIDGE DRIVE

by Cathryn Grant

The quiet of her new house wrapped itself around Roberta's skull. It felt like a quilt in which the fabric had been rubbed smooth until it was as soft as a rose petal. The sun was just setting and already she longed to slide between her clean sheets. Tonight would be her first good night's sleep in six years. The silence was thick, making the tick of her clock sound sluggish. No cars moved on the dead-end street.

Roberta took off her clothes and dropped them into the wicker basket. She ran water for her bath. She would use crystals instead of bubbles, believing that the snapping granules would work harder to dig out the grit from boxes and packing tape. She put her foot into the steaming water and felt the lavender bath crystals nip at the tips of her toes. In spite of the heat, she lowered herself quickly. Steam rose and stroked her face, forcing her muscles to unclench. The scent made its way into her nostrils and even her brain felt like it was being scrubbed.

The noise at her recently vacated apartment used to keep her head in a vice all day and most of the night. Children screamed, unrestrained by their lazy parents. Thin shrieks sliced through the air, around corners, and through walls. Tears boiled up in her eyes when she tried to eat dinner. Lifting her fork to her mouth, her hand would tremble as the shrill sounds climbed the walls and slithered across the ceiling. When the children finally were put into their beds, thudding sounds stole the whispered promise of silence.

A resident of Sunnyvale, California, Cathryn Grant has written "slice of life" columns for the *Sunnyvale Sun* and feature stories for the *Cupertino Courier*. The following story is her first commercial fiction publication, though several non-commercial religious periodicals have previously published her short stories. A hearty welcome to a fine new talent!

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She heard the dull, subterranean thump of stereo bass. In her bed, the ceiling over her face shuddered as the young men in the second-floor apartment traipsed back and forth, pacing like leopards. Rumbling sounds dripped from their television shows and video games.

Even when they went out, she had no peace. The coming and going of cars in the parking lot outside her window kept her on the precipice of sleep. Only after the last tomcat had swung his headlights over her pale curtains, revved his engine, slammed his door, and sauntered to his apartment could she sleep.

The apartment complex had been a spacious, older building. It had a center garden bursting with rosebushes, strips of moist, thick grass, small magnolia trees, and flowering shrubs. But the atmosphere was destroyed by too many human lives pressed too close together. She stayed, trapped until she could save enough money for a small house.

Tranquility flowed over Roberta the first time she looked at this house with the small porch, edged by two archways. She had fallen desperately in love with its solid, rough adobe walls and the soft red rolls of tile laced together on the roof. The rough, dark front door had a tiny window with an iron door that could be opened to check for visitors.

The house next door was not as fortunate. It languished under faded brown siding on the front and sides. The back was plaster painted avocado green. The two-car garage stayed open all day, gagging on boxes, tools, and unwanted furniture stacked to precarious heights. A small space was scooped out to hold a rough plywood workbench and an electric saw. The only redeeming feature was a bed of prizeworthy roses growing between the two houses.

Roberta's garage was tidy. Her car was parked in the center. Near the door was a sturdy set of metal shelves. On the bottom shelf was her little hibachi, a bottle of lighter fluid, and a small bag of charcoal. The next shelf held a brown bottle of plant food, her watering can, and gardening tools. The top shelf had a few clay pots and a bag of gladiola bulbs that she planned to get into the ground immediately after the new sod was laid on Monday.

As Roberta soaked in the tub, her mind ran over the parts of her house and her quiet street as if she were running her tongue over her lips. She closed her eyes and imagined herself in a silent world without headaches, safely enclosed in her piece of heaven on earth.

Her thoughts slid down into the steaming bath water. The house was filled with new sounds, things she hadn't been able to hear before, like the steady hum of the refrigerator.

A new sound came from the back of the house, just a few feet beyond the bathroom wall. There was a faint squeak and then a click. It sounded like someone opening the door that led to her back stoop. A different sound followed on the heels of the first: the

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squeal of rubber-soled shoes on the hardwood floor.

Roberta sat up straight with a soft splash. She listened, and soon there were more tiny squeaks. She stood up, grabbed her oversized white towel off the counter, and wrapped it around herself while she stepped out of the tub and onto the white bath mat. She opened the door and stuck her head into the hallway. The air felt chilly after the steam in the bathroom. She shivered, held herself still, and listened. A few more squeaks on the floor were followed quickly by the scrape of boxes she'd left on her kitchen table.

Roberta yanked the towel tighter and crept down the hall, berating herself for leaving wet footprints on the glossy wood. She shivered again. Her heart beat with a shudder, even though her mind was telling her it couldn't possibly be someone out to hurt her, not rummaging in a box of rice and pasta.

At the kitchen door she stopped and moved slowly past the door frame.

Standing on her oak kitchen chair was the boy from the ugly house next door. He had pulled a strand of spaghetti out of a half-opened package. The spaghetti wobbled between his lips like a stalk of grass as he nibbled the end. His arms were buried up to his armpits, digging through the box for something more interesting to eat.

"What do you think you're doing in my house? Get off that chair this minute!" yelled Roberta.

Roberta wanted to rush at him and yank him off the chair, push him out the back door, but she was conscious of the towel she had to keep clasping with her right hand.

The boy turned to look at her. "I'm Jack," he said. He chomped on the spaghetti and it rapidly disappeared into his mouth.

"I told you to get off the chair."

He stepped down slowly and stood staring at her. "Do you have any kids?"

"I asked you a question first. What are you doing in my house?"

Even as she asked, she didn't care to hear the answer. Whatever it was, it would be meaningless. "Go stand by the back door," she said.

Roberta darted down the hall to her room. She dropped the towel on the floor, chastising herself again because she'd only been in the house for one day and now she'd have to buff the bedroom and hallway floors to keep the dampness from marring the finish. She yanked on a clean pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, slid her feet into a pair of canvas shoes, and hurried back to the kitchen.

The boy had not moved to the back door like she'd told him to. He was back on the chair, peering into the box. She grabbed his arm and yanked him off the chair. She tightened her grasp, squeezing the flesh above his elbow. She dragged him out the back door and along the side of the house where her gate stood open. "You have no right to come into my yard when you're not invited,

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much less into my house. When you want to ask a question, you ring the bell."

"I was looking for my ball," he whimpered.

"I don't care. Don't you ever come in my yard again."

Roberta felt a needle of pain in her left temple. It made her angrier as the needle drilled smoothly from her skull deeper into her brain. She pressed her index finger on the tender spot and felt a slight relief.

She cut through the bare patch of ground in front of a huge, scratchy palmlike shrub that grew ambiguously on the property line. Most of it was planted in the neighbors' yard, but the stalks reached out and scratched her gate, blocking part of the opening. The neighbors' gate yawned open, pushed against the house by thick, dried weeds. The open gate exposed an elaborate display of tubs, cardboard boxes, and stacks of cardboard tied with string. There was barely room to squeeze past to their backyard. The passage was further hampered by branches trimmed from various shrubs, protruding from a bent can much too small for its contents. Dried and brittle, the clippings looked like prison bars protecting the bins of sawdust, bottles, plastic, and stained newspapers.

Jack pulled away from her. "You're hurting me."

"Quit dragging your feet."

"You're mean."

"You're trespassing."

Roberta pounded her fist on the neighbors' front door. She'd never met them, only seen them working in their yard. She had waved optimistic greetings, planning to get acquainted after she was all organized.

The neighbor woman was thick from having given birth to three children. Her brown and gray hair was permed. She wore childish jumpers with wide straps and big pockets. The husband had a pointed head that was bald on top. Below the bald spot was a short sprinkling of white hair, making the crown of his head look like a boiled egg sitting in a white egg cup.

There was a teenaged boy whom Roberta had seen lurking under the tree in the front yard. He wore baggy shorts that flapped around his knees like a skirt. His blond hair was cut very short and you could tell that some day his head would have the same eggy look as his father's.

The daughter was the only one that had an intelligent gleam in her eye. Roberta had only seen her once. She felt the little girl and the roses didn't belong with the rest of them.

Roberta knocked again, feeling a sting in her knuckles and a sharp pain in her arm. No one answered. Jack gave a violent yank, pulling himself away from her. He opened the door, went inside, and shut it in her face. Roberta pounded harder, her eyes

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blurry with anger. The child was completely disrespectful and she would have to lay down the law to his parents. She pounded a fourth time, prompting a muffled cry from Jack. "Mom! The mean lady next door might want to talk to you."

Might, thought Roberta. Not only was he badly behaved, he wasn't very bright. She heard patient footsteps.

The woman opened the door. "Hi," she said. Her words came out slowly, as if she hadn't heard Roberta's fist slamming against the door, as if her son's reference to the mean lady hadn't penetrated her tight curls. She smiled and added, "Welcome to the neighborhood. I was planning to stop by, but wanted to wait until you got yourself settled."

"Unfortunately, we have to meet under less than pleasant conditions." Roberta paused. "My name's Roberta Finch, by the way."

"Diane Maxwell." Diane pulled her son close to her side and rubbed the top of his head.

"Your son walked right into my house. He was snooping through boxes in my kitchen." Roberta stepped back in anticipation of Diane's shocked exclamation.

Diane smirked. "I'm sure he wasn't snooping." She smiled and pulled Jack even closer to her hip.

It always happened. Families circled like a wagon train, protecting their own. They assumed outsiders were wrong, if not outright liars, while they defended their families.

"He was snooping," Roberta said. "But that's beside the point. He has no business even being in my backyard without permission, much less walking into my house uninvited."

"I gave him permission to go into your backyard. He lost his ball."

"You gave him permission?" Perhaps Diane had misunderstood. "You can't give him permission to go into someone else's yard."

"He lost his ball. No harm done. He just wanted to take a quick look. He tried the door, he's used to visiting all the neighbors, right, Jack?"

Jack nodded, his face slack and his eyes round.

Roberta pushed her face closer to Diane's. "You allow your son to wander into the neighbors' houses without permission? Your neighbors put up with that?"

"He doesn't mean any harm," said Diane, still compulsively rubbing Jack's head. It looked like she expected a genie to appear and grant her three wishes, the first of which would be a wish that Roberta would go away, or better yet, move away.

"I don't think you understand," said Roberta. "So let me explain it like this: I don't want your children in my backyard. And if any of them ever come into my house again, I'll call the police."

"My goodness," said Diane. The rubbing finally stopped. "He's just a child. But if you feel that strongly about it, I'll try to remind

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him to ask before he goes looking for a toy the next time."

"Try isn't good enough," said Roberta. "Make sure it doesn't happen." She turned around and walked down the driveway, took the few steps along the sidewalk to her driveway, and went into her house. She was shaking, unable to understand why people refused to manage their children.

Two days later Roberta planted her gladiola bulbs, all twenty-five of them, in the fertilized patch of dirt under her living room window. By the time the first spears were cutting through the dark soil, she knew she would never have peace in her new home.

When she bought the house, she had known about the three children living next door. She hadn't known that the divorced man in the house on the other side had two obnoxious boys who visited every other weekend. She hadn't known her yard was the accepted pathway between the two houses. Even Jack's father, William, cut across Roberta's yard when he went to talk to the other man about one of his home-repair issues. The children ran, skipped, and jumped across her freshly laid sod, and over her tender young jasmine shrubs, planted in a pathetic attempt to block the path across her property. Swarms of noisy children with sticky hands and gooey noses seemed to be everywhere. She heard them in every room of her house.

Jack didn't come into her backyard after that first time, but he commandeered her front yard as an extension of his own. Roberta's shoulders sagged with weariness from marching out the front door, telling Jack and his friends to walk on the sidewalk or to move their wrestling matches to his own yard. The children didn't even dignify her requests with an answer. They stared at her as if she spoke another language.

Roberta couldn't make up her mind which member of the neighbor family she despised the most. It wasn't Diane with her glazed face hovering above her appliquéd jumpers. In spite of her first encounter, it wasn't little Jack. The girl, Cynthia, was innocuous.

The teenaged boy, Billy, was repulsive. He slunk around the neighborhood, peering out of half-closed eyes at everything he saw, smoking cigarettes at night when his parents were busy in the house. It was easy for Billy to hover just beyond the rim of light that came from their living room window. He stood at the end of the bed of roses, lit up, tossed his match on the ground, and puffed rapidly until the cigarette was a very long stub. Then he squashed it like a fat bug on scraps of lumber that his little brother left lying around the yard.

If there was one bright spot in Roberta's torment, it was that Billy smoked right next to his father's rose bed—she wallowed in his teenaged hostility. His father lavished his love on those six rosebushes, two yellow, two red, and two white. Every weekend he plucked weeds out of the bed and scalloped the sunken areas around the roots of each bush. He spread finely granulated saw-

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dust on the ground to hold moisture in the soil. He pruned and sprayed insecticide that he thought powerful enough to require his wearing a military gas mask. The mask covered most of his face, and had two vents the size of cocktail-nut cans that stuck out on either side, making him look like a mutant chipmunk.

The children behaved as if all of Coolidge Drive was their personal toy bin. Balls lingered in the gutter and bikes obstructed the sidewalk. She prayed that a neighbor would back a car out over an errant bike, but her prayers went unanswered. Nearly every morning, Roberta found one of their toys embedded in her lawn.

Anything left on her lawn belonged to her. When she went out to pick up her paper, she was the only living creature standing in the damp air, looking at the toys defiling her street. She carried a half-empty bottle of bleach for collecting Billy's long cigarette butts. She picked them up with a gagging sound in her throat and deposited them in the bleach. Then she bent over to pick up her paper. In spite of the dim light, she could see even the smallest green soldier stuck headfirst in her lawn. She glided over and removed the toy of the day. Some mornings she had a bonanza, there were two or three toys, little plastic figures and metal cars. Once she had found a golf club. She plucked them off the wet grass and carried them into the house. After laying the paper next to her cup of coffee and carton of yogurt, she went out the back door, around the side of the house, and dumped the alien objects into her cavernous trash can.

The same day the first yellow bud poked its face out of a gladiola stalk, Roberta went shopping with a friend from work. She drove away when a thin layer of fog was still silencing the neighborhood. She returned late in the day. The air was hot and dry, sucking the moisture out of her nostrils.

She turned her car into Coolidge Drive, slamming her foot on the break pedal when she saw the circus in her front yard. The neighbors had spread a yellow plastic sheet across their lawn. It was about three feet wide and twenty feet long, with a hose attached at one end. Water seeped through pin-sized holes, making the plastic slick. All four children, from the houses on both sides, were lining up near her jasmine and racing across her lawn. They jumped onto the plastic and slid the length of the sheet, screaming as their slippery bodies plummeted toward the driveway. Diane and William sat in lawn chairs near the roses, watching the flailing, flying children. Their yard was soggy with water, and Roberta's was flattened from wet feet. She could see some of her torn grass plastered on the children's legs.

Roberta stomped on the gas and her car shot into the driveway. She jammed the gear shift into park and fell out the door, leaving her keys dangling from the ignition. Her car beeped frantically for her to come back and get the keys. She lurched into her yard and

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cried, "What are you doing? You're ruining my lawn!"

They looked at her. The children hesitated in their line, glancing toward their parents for a signal telling them whether or not they should stop. Whatever the indecipherable signal was, the next child took off running and flung himself onto the plastic mat with a yelp.

"Get them off my lawn!" she screamed.

William rose slowly from his chair while Diane continued to watch her children. Her face was relaxed and her unpainted lips were barely touching. A smile danced across them and her eyes refused to flicker in Roberta's direction.

"We didn't think you'd mind," said William.

"Make them stop running right now! The lawn will be torn to shreds," she screamed.

"We didn't think you'd mind because it's so hot and there's no place for them to cool off," he said.

Roberta's eyes throbbed against her eyelids. Her heart beat faster, making it difficult to breathe. It was all she could do to keep from yanking the offending plastic right out from under them. Her voice escaped in a hiss. "Get them off my lawn. Now."

Diane eased herself out of her chair and she and her husband silently motioned for the children to move their line onto the sidewalk. Together they lifted the wet plastic and shifted it at an angle. The children would have to run on cement since the plastic now stretched from the sidewalk to the driveway.

"I hope they don't get hurt," said Diane as she moved past Roberta and shifted her lawn chair so the children wouldn't crash into it when they flew off the other end of the mat.

Roberta put her car in the garage and went into the house. She locked the front door, including the deadbolt. She slipped off her sandals, washed her feet in the bathtub, and rubbed them dry with a thick white towel that she immediately put in the empty well of the washing machine. Before she sat in her leather chair by the living room window, she poured herself a glass of Chardonnay.

The family would continue to trample on her life and slaughter her peace. She hadn't spent her life savings on a cute Spanish house in a nice neighborhood to be held hostage by a herd of goats. Something had to be done.

They had finished running and sliding and had gone into their house. They left the yellow plastic lying in the yard. The hose was unscrewed from the faucet, coiled like a huge green snake wrapping itself around the plastic. The faucet dripped onto a spreading puddle of mud.

Her gaze turned toward the rosebushes. They were so beautiful. She had never seen rosebushes with so many blooms; there must be thirty flowers on each plant. She longed to pick a white rose. There were enough for her to have one in a vase every week, all summer.

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The neighbors never cut any of the blooms to take them inside. They let them grow free on the shrubs, while William coddled them.

He took better care of the roses than of his children. He touched them so tenderly, and when he was finished with their Saturday morning care, Diane came out and rubbed his head while they stood looking at the roses as if they, not the three urchins, were their beloved children.

He didn't deserve to have those roses. Roberta's shiny new pruning shears with the long, fanglike blades would make short order of that bush. She would clip each bloom at the lowermost part of its stem. Mabye she would just clip one each day. How many days would it take, she wondered, until he noticed the population decreasing? As long as it was taking for his stupid children to notice their toys were disappearing?

The children never trampled on those flowers or left their toys lying under the roses. The rose bed was a sanctuary, untouched by the mess that spilled out of every orifice in the house next door.

Roberta ate her dinner in the kitchen, unable to bear looking out where the twisted plastic mat grew pale in the darkening yard. Soon Billy would be out with his cigarette. Diane and William never appeared to smell the smoke, or if they did, they weren't doing anything to stop his nasty habit.

The rest of the street was organized, lined with well-kept yards. The inhabitants were quiet. Other children living on the street stayed in their backyards and picked up their toys. She would be doing the people of Coolidge Drive a favor if she delivered an appropriate punishment to these people.

It was dark and Roberta was back in her chair, sipping her final glass of cold white wine. Billy had taken up his post at the foot of the rose bed. His rapid-fire puffs didn't look pleasurable. At first, she had considered pouring her concoction of bleach and cigarette butts into their yard. But now her blood had reached a full, rolling boil, and a mucky broth of ash and paper seemed too kind.

Let the punishment fit the crime. Roberta swallowed the last of her wine and went into the kitchen. She soaped and rinsed her glass. She dried it with a linen towel until it sparkled, and put it in the cabinet.

Billy stood outside in the dark, flicking his limp paper matches into her yard. They weren't as easy to track down as the cigarette butts, and she found them floating on all her plants. They even found their way onto her hardwood floors, entering the house surreptitiously stuck to the bottom of her shoes. What would happen if he flicked one of his matches before it was dead and it landed in the remains of the insecticide? She had no idea whether insecticide was flammable.

Roberta turned off the lights and went into her bedroom. She

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lay on her bed with the spread still in place and stared at the blackness covering the ceiling. Without the roses, William would have nothing left to do but pay attention to controlling his children. She lay on her back for hours, listening to the sounds of the street disappear into the night.

Roberta waited. She had to wait three weeks. It was a Sunday night when they all finally piled into the blue minivan. Diane was carrying a casserole pan wrapped in dish towels.

At nine o'clock they weren't home yet, and it was as dark as it was going to get before they came tumbling back down the street.

Roberta pulled a pair of black leggings out of her drawer. She put on a long black shirt, and gripped her hair into a ponytail that hugged the nape of her neck. She crept into the garage and took her can of lighter fluid off its spot on the shelf. She stepped out of the garage door near the house and looked up and down the street. She could rely on her other neighbors to be inside most of the time. Perhaps they felt invaded, too. Roberta would deliver them all. With one act she would punish William for his misplaced priorities, expose Billy for the slob that he was, and get revenge for the destruction they'd inflicted on her yard and her sanity.

She walked casually along the front of the house, just in case a neighbor was peering out at the silent street. Pausing in front of her gladiolas, she whispered, "Soon you'll be the most beautiful flowers on the street." She reached for the hose and unwound it several loops, dragging it toward the side of her yard. She'd hold the hose on her right side, so if anyone was looking out, they would think she was watering the edges of the grass near the rose bed. The neighbors' hose was still in the middle of the yard where it had lain for weeks. William moistened his roses with a huge metal watering can, making countless, useless trips to refill it.

Crimping her hose under one arm, she popped open the cap on the lighter fluid. Then she gripped the hose and can in the same hand and began squirting the sharp-smelling liquid along the base of the roses, soaking the sawdust, flicking her wrist so lighter fluid squirted out on the stems and blossoms. Hopefully the smell would dissipate quickly. If they caught a whiff, they might think it was from the barbecuing she'd done earlier.

When the can was empty, she snapped the lid shut and rewound the hose. She put the can back on the shelf. Stepping out of the garage, she took one last glance at the roses. She should have cut one and put it in her bedroom. But it was too late now. She went inside and took up her position in the chair by the window, leaving the lights off.

It was twenty past ten before the minivan ambled down the street and eased into the driveway. There was a lot of opening and slamming of doors. Billy scuffled up and down the sidewalk, ignor-

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ing his father's shouted commands to close the back of the van.

Roberta's heart began to pound. Soon the noises would sink like dirt settling in a garden after it's been inflated with water. Then Billy would light his cigarette.

Her vigilance was rewarded. When the porch light went out, Billy wandered over to his spot at the foot of the rose bed. He pulled a cigarette out of one pocket and a book of matches out of the other. He lit the cigarette, puffed frantically, and dropped the still-burning match onto the ground. The bed where the roses would die burst into flames. Billy jumped back and yelped like a dog whose nose had been pinched. He stumbled, falling on his rear. Roberta smiled as the flames leaped up the stems of the flowers, turning the blossoms bright orange.

She stood up, waiting for the commotion. Within minutes, Diane appeared in the front yard, her white skin and pale yellow dress brought to life by the flames that leaped up, licking the eaves of the house. Billy fumbled with the faucet, turning it on when the hose wasn't yet attached.

Diane screamed. Roberta could see her mouth moving, but couldn't decipher the shrill words. Finally, something had gotten her excited. Billy dropped the hose and had twisted his body to face the shrubs. His eyes bulged out of his face, looking at the side of the house where the flames were spreading further than Roberta had anticipated. The smell of smoke seeped into her living room. All she could see was orange flames. What was causing all that smoke?

Diane grabbed Billy's baggy shorts, dragging him toward the house; her lips still formed a scream, but no sound came out of her throat. Billy held the limp hose and stumbled between the faucet and his mother. Although further amazement at the neighbors seemed impossible, Roberta was stunned by Billy's inability to do anything about the waves of flame cascading over the roses, blackening the buds and stems. Diane's hysteria was just as incredible. Apparently she could be a woman given to panic in spite of her bland reaction to her children's unruly behavior.

Now Diane was sobbing, hanging on Billy, pushing him toward the house. Roberta had to get a better view. She couldn't believe that neither one of them had managed to get a grip long enough to attach the hose and turn on the water. The small fire would get out of control if one of them didn't stop stumbling uselessly in the yard. She hoped she wasn't going to have to go outside and subdue it for them. Her triumph would end with a whimper if she had to douse her own handiwork.

Against her better judgment, she stepped closer to the window. As she pressed her face against the glass, an animal-like bellowing punctured her fascination with the brilliant flames. It sounded like a creature caught in a metal trap. The bellowing obliterated

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all the other noise, and ripped her attention away from Billy and his mother. The sound came from the side of the house, but she had no windows on that side. It was so loud it sounded like the wounded animal had entered her living room.

She ran to the front door and opened the tiny iron door that faced the neighbors' property. The metal touched her lips, leaving a bitter taste when she sucked in her breath. Now she could see what had caused Billy and Diane to trip over each other as if their very lives were going up in flames.

William was trapped in his recycling center. The fire had raced through the dried weeds and rushed hungrily to the side of the house where the flames satiated themselves with stacks of cardboard and string, and cans full of dried clippings. After creeping over the newspapers and boxes of sawdust, the flames had gathered around William's legs and grabbed onto his slacks and cotton shirt. Bursts of fire climbed his body and the fabric of his clothes was turning into black flakes that floated up into the darkness.

His mouth was open, and agonizing cries poured out as he turned in circles, trying to find a place to run, but his cans and combustible materials surrounded him. The flames formed a small picket fence from the rose bed to the gate. Billy, who at long last had managed to screw the hose onto the faucet, was afraid to cross the border between him and his father. Instead, he sprayed the hose in every direction, over the roses, where the flames were dying back, across the pointed needles of the palm, and along the fence.

Roberta didn't want to watch anymore, but neither could she close the metal door. Her face pressed tighter into the opening, and she continued to stare at the burning man and the helpless woman and son.

When she heard the sirens, she pulled back and found the strength to close the little iron window. She heard the burping sounds of sirens winding down, and the screams of William. The flames, finished with his clothing, searched the open containers for more fuel and at the same time continued to lap at his flesh. Roberta thought she could smell his burning skin. Then his shrieks disappeared and all she could hear was the clank and rattle of equipment and the firm shouts of the firefighters.

Roberta crept down the hall to her bedroom and took off her clothes. She folded them and put them in a box in the closet. She slipped between her crisp, white sheets, cherishing the soothing coolness against her bare skin.

Only the roses were meant to die. This was an unfortunate accident, but it served them right. She reached into the drawer by her bed and fumbled around for the earplugs that had been useless in her apartment. She tucked them into her ears and closed her eyes, drifting into a silent, peaceful sleep. ●

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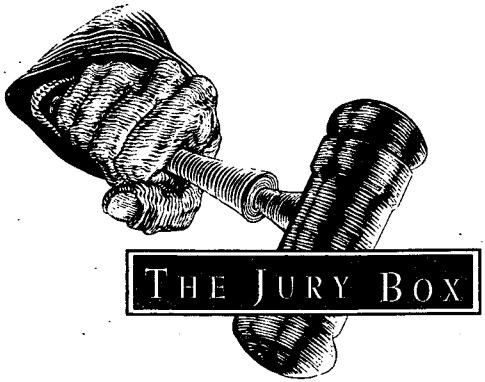

by Jon L. Breen

The short-story collections in the roundup below deliver more of the pleasures derived from crime, mystery, and detection than six months' worth of novels.

**** Ruth Rendell: *Piranha to Scurfy and Other Stories,* Crown, $23. *EQMM* readers will recall the title novella and several of the other ten stories from a writer who is great regardless of category. Themes include life stages, memory, obsession, and real or imagined supernatural influences.

**** Edward D. Hoch: *The Old Spies Club and Other Intrigues of Rand,* Crippen & Landru, $17 trade paper, $42 signed limited hardcover. Fifteen espionage/detective hybrids about Jeffery Rand, all from *EQMM* (1971-1999), with the author's trademark plotting ingenuity and a variety of exotic backgrounds. Favorites: the wildly plotted "The Spy at the End of the Rainbow" and the title tale.

**** Edward Wellen: *Perps,* Five Star, $23.95. In 26 stories, most from *EQMM, AHMM,* and other digests, and ranging in date from 1958 ("The Taste of Revenge," reminiscent in turn of the Prodigal Son, Hemingway's "The Killers," and O. Henry) to a couple of 2001 originals, an unjustly overlooked writer dazzles with his versatility, economical prose, and story-structure magicianship.

**** John Lutz: *The Nudger Dilemmas,* Five Star, $24.95. Thirteen deftly plotted, amusingly told stories, most from *AHMM* or original anthologies, about antacid-popping St. Louis sleuth Nudger, one of the best of the not-too-hardboiled private eyes. The Edgar-winning gem "Ride the Lightning" and at least a couple of others also exist in novel-length versions.

*** Dorothy Salisbury Davis: *In the Still of the Night: Tales to Lock Your Door By,* Five Star, $24.95. Eight stories, most from Adams Round Table anthologies, one from *EQMM,* by an MWA Grand Master who has adorned the field since 1949.

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All are unusual and thought-provoking, with moral conundrums at their center.

*** Frederick Forsyth: *The Veteran,* St. Martin's, $24.95. Five stories from long-short to novella length show a journalist's knack for background details in varied settings (the Old Bailey, art auctions, an Italian festival, a 747 flight, the Little Big Horn) and a supreme storyteller's ability to engage and surprise the reader. (I trust "The Miracle" does not reflect the author's attitude to his audience.)

*** Maxine O'Callaghan: *Deal With the Devil and Other Stories,* Five Star, $23.95. Private eye Delilah West in five stories and Emma Hartley in a pair from the other side of the law are in good form, but the seven non-series chillers include the book's best stories: the haunting historical "Wolf Winter" and the previously unpublished dark suspense story "Black Is the Color of My True Love's Heart."

*** Max Allan Collins: *Kisses of Death: A Nathan Heller Casebook,* Crippen & Landru, $17 trade paper, $42 signed limited hardcover. The title novelette of this second Heller collection previously appeared in a limited-distribution audiotape; the other six private-eye historicals are from original anthologies. Celebrities as varied as Marilyn Monroe, Mickey Cohen, and Bill Veeck appear, along with Heller regulars Barney Ross and Eliot Ness.

*** Barbara Collins: *Too Many Tomcats and Other Feline Tales of Suspense,* Five Star, $20.95. Is Collins a better short-story writer than her husband Max (see above) as claimed in his introduction? Could be, by the evidence of 11 well-crafted tales, two new and the rest from original anthologies. Warning to cozy readers: The author is no cat lover, and they are most often the agent or object of murderous impulses.

*** Jane Rubino: *Knight Errant: The Singular Adventures of Sherlock Holmes,* Calabash, $19.50. Three novellas—well-plotted, free of historical and literary gimmicks, and properly Watsonian in tone—place Rubino in the upper echelon of pastiche writers.

** Frank Thomas: *Sherlock Holmes Mystery Tales,* Gryphon (Brooklyn), $16. Plots confronting a playful, jocular Holmes and Watson range from clever to silly, and the dialogue has some anachronisms and solecisms. (Would Holmes say, "I say, old boy" or "I'll buy that"?) Approached in the right spirit, these 13 new stories can give the reader almost as much fun as the author clearly had writing them.

** Monica Quill: *Death Takes the Veil and Other Stories,* Five Star, $23.95. Ralph McInerny, the prolific writer behind the pun-name, does better people and prose than puzzles. Sister Mary Teresa, the formidable Nero Wolfean nun, appears in four novellas, one from *AHMM* and three from *EQMM,* with

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three non-series stories from *EQMM*.

** Barbara Collins and Max Allan Collins: *Murder—His and Hers,* Five Star, $24.95. Both partners show to better advantage in individual collections (see above). Four are by her, three by him, two by both, all from original anthologies.

** John Jakes: *Crime Time,* Five Star, $24.95. A dozen pulp and digest stories of fantasy, crime, detection, private-eye slapstick, and Bond-style espionage from pre-bestseller Jakes are professional but routine. All save one 1996 satire were originally published between 1952 and 1966. Two from *EQMM,* written in *Variety*-ese, are much the best. Jakes's preface and Ed McBain's introduction offer entertaining views of the writing life.

** Michael Bracken: *Tequila Sunrise,* Wildside, $13.95. Nathaniel Rose, St. Louis private eye of the non-wisecracking, violence-relishing, sexually busy sort, covers overly familiar territory in seven capably written cases.

** Michael Bracken: *Bad Girls,* Wildside, $14.95. A better collection from the author, these dozen have more variety, from spies to cops to crooks, most with an erotic component. The title theme sometimes gives away too much. Most are "modified" (toned down?) from various men's magazine versions.

All of the 18 stories in Joe L. Hensley's *Deadly Hunger and Other Tales* (Five Star, $24.95) recur from previous collections, save two offbeat new chillers, "A Lot of Sense" and "Watcher." The introduction includes a moving tribute to Hensley's late wife.

Richard A. Lupoff's mastery of varying voices and backgrounds shows in a strong pair of detective stories in the mixed-genre collection *Claremont Tales* (Golden Gryphon [Urbana, IL], $23.95 trade, $100 signed limited): "Black Mist," set in a Japanese colony on one of the moons of Mars, and "The Second Drug," a theatrical locked-room set in 1931 San Francisco and true to period.

If you think of Arthur B. Reeve's 1910 cornerstone *The Silent Bullet* (Wildside, $17.50) as a museum piece, its dozen stories about scientific sleuth Craig Kennedy, once known as the American Sherlock Holmes, might surprise you with their craftsmanship and readability.

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SITS. VAC.

by Neil Schofield

Neil Schofield has spent most of his working life as a professional writer for corporations and for the tourist industry. His wry perspective on the business world informs the following offbeat tale of a manager whose career has hit a plateau. Mr. Schofield is the author of several earlier stories for *EQMM;* he is fast becoming one of our most prolific contributors.

I can get back to my hide without any trouble, although my back prickles all the way. I am becoming an expert at scuttling. I avoid the curb edges, I cling close to the walls of buildings. I have developed a lurching walk and I mutter to myself. No doubt I present a weird and pitiable sight—some people even try to push money into my hand—but I don't care. The main thing is that I don't see any sign of *Them,* but that's the trouble. You don't. How can you tell them from all the other tens of thousands of commuters leaving their offices? *They* look exactly like you and me. Especially, they look like me. Or me as I used to be.

Sometimes I take the chance of going for a much-needed drink in a nondescript pub on the fringes of the City, not far from where I have my hide. I sit at a table in the furthest, darkest corner of the public bar.

Very often there is a City type, having a quick one before catching his train, usually with a tired face, office suit, briefcase at his side, who usually gives me a curious glance before shifting away. I sometimes wonder what he would say if I leaned across, tapped him on the chest, and said, "Have you heard from Mr. Cheeseman yet? No? Well, all I can say is, pray that you don't. But, if you're of a certain age and stuck at a certain level of middle-to-upper management, which you are by the looks of you, your turn will come. You don't have to believe anything I say, but your turn will come. . . ."

But I don't do that, because he just might be one of *Them.* And if he isn't, he'd think I had gone mad. And why not? After all, for four months now I have been thinking the same thing.

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I had never been head-hunted before Mr. Cheeseman rang me, and I have to say that I found it extremely flattering. Not too flattering, mind you, because he invited me to lunch at Rules. I don't know if you know it, but Rules is a restaurant in Maiden Lane, just off the Strand, and it is solid and very English: the sort of place where solid, unexciting people feel at ease. I had a drink at the bar since I was a little early, and ate a couple of their quail's eggs while looking around. Rules doesn't change, nor does the menu, much. The walls are covered in very English oil paintings, and most of the tables were peopled by very English gents who are *no* oil paintings.

So this was how Mr. Cheeseman had classed me. Solid, unexciting, but not cheap. Well, I suppose that's exactly what I was. I was forty-something, divorced, no children, and sitting in the sort of middle-to-upper management job where people like me end up, with no clear idea about what I was going to do next. Or if I was going to do anything next. Or even if I wanted to. Like many of us, I suppose, I occasionally flipped through the "Executive Situations Vacant" sections, but without much desire to move, to apply, to go through the irritating motions. I was happily—or at any rate, not *un*happily—stagnating, if I'm honest.

After the divorce (which had passed amicably enough, Jane having accepted a cash settlement for her share of the detached house in Ealing which we had bought together), I used to spend worryingly long periods of my evenings in front of the mirror, wondering. I was reasonably presentable, still with an impressive amount of dark hair and with that sort of saddish face that I had discovered, early on in my adolescence, appealed to quite a lot of women. But who was I now?

What I was, was a manager. Nothing specific, and there are a lot like me. Some of us specialise, in Sales, Marketing, Personnel, Production, but there are a lot more of us who simply manage. That is our speciality. And being managers, highly intelligent and versatile, we move around from company to company: automotive, computers, or pharmaceuticals, tobacco, drinks, or hotels—you name it, there we are, managing. We're totally interchangeable, I suppose. Just plug us in and off we go. On the way, we pick up a lot of specialist knowledge—I, for instance, am moderately well-versed in computer technology, personnel, and office management, with some marketing thrown in. But I don't specialise. I'm a manager, you see. I manage.

My habits were solid, unexciting. I read a lot, watched too much television; I played a little golf, not much, because secretly it bores

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me as a game; and I spent a lot of time wondering why I had no real passions and no real friends. Even the women I went out with from time to time were solid and unexciting. But that, I suppose, you could class as a sort of unconscious defence against being attracted into anything too exciting.

I was well into my fourth quail's egg, with my second sherry, and beginning to feel slightly depressed with all this self-analysis, when Mr. Cheeseman danced into Rules like a miniature hurricane. And from that moment, everything changed. He darted straight at me, shook my hand, ordered a drink for us both, and before I had a chance to take stock of him, we were sitting at our table, where he plunged immediately into the menu.

He was a small man, very small. Not a midget, mind you, but small enough. He had a round, wrinkled, ruddy face crowned with luxuriant, absolutely snow-white hair. He also had piercing blue eyes, and when he glanced up at me for the first time, he showed a wonderful smile, with perfectly white teeth. Looking at him, I couldn't help but think of a Cheeryble Brother. I put him in his late sixties, though I could have been wrong either way. He looked at me, twinkling over his old-fashioned half-moon glasses, and said, "So, Mr. Fowler—let's call you Bill, it's more friendly—what shall you have, do you think?"

I hadn't even thought about it, and applied myself to the menu. He put his glasses away in the waistcoat pocket of his perfectly cut suit—Gieves and Hawkes, if I was any judge—and watched me carefully.

I ordered the soup and the steak-and-kidney pie, which is admittedly very English, but which, made at Rules, is the best in the universe. Mr. Cheeseman ordered the same, which I thought was either excellent psychology or just showed his simple tastes. He ordered a bottle of Château Palmer, and I blinked when I heard the year. Perhaps I was a little more exciting than I had thought.

Then we settled down to chat.

He knew a lot about me. Over the soup, he ran quickly and without hesitation through my education and career. He knew everything. I was impressed. Where had he got all this? I suddenly began to feel quite a lot of confidence in this strange little man.

He put on his glasses again to peer at the label on the bottle the sommelier had brought, and nodded approvingly.

Then he folded his hands beneath his chin and looked directly at me.

"And what are we going to do next, young Mr. Fowler?"

I was a little thrown by this. I knew that normally when you talked to a headhunter you sold yourself, you talked about your game plan, about where you saw yourself in five, ten years' time. I didn't have a game plan or any clear picture of myself, in even a

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year from now. So I floundered for a bit. He nodded, as if I was confirming what he knew already.

"You're a bit stuck, aren't you? Oh, there's no shame in it. Good Lord, the mass of men spend their whole lives stuck. But you're a man with ability. You've done quite well. But time is passing."

I knew that.

"Good Lord," he said, "if I had half your ability, I'd be carving a bloody swath through the pack of them. But you also need a helping hand and a lot of luck. Look at some of the fools running public companies. You don't think they got where they are on their abilities, do you?"

He named half a dozen people about whom I had to admit I had always posed the question: How on earth did they manage it?

"They managed it because they had help. A bit of luck. And in some cases, the right family name. But we can't do anything about that, can we?"

The steak-and-kidney pie was just as good as I had remembered, and the Château Palmer was magnificent.

"Suppose I ought to tell you something about me. Seems only fair, doesn't it?"

"I have to admit," I said, "that when you rang it was rather a surprise. I thought I knew most of the headhunt—recruitment advisers," I ended lamely.

He grinned at me. He really did have the most likeable smile.

"Headhunters, Bill. That's what we are, so why not say it? I'm not ashamed of the word. It's an honourable profession, hunting is. And why should you have heard of me? I'm private, I am. I don't go crawling round, buttering up people, whining for contracts. That's hunting with a blunderbuss, is that. I prefer to use a sniper's rifle. I'm different, I am."

And so he was.

"I may have several holes for you, Bill, but I ain't going to tell you. Not just yet, anyway."

So he wasn't hunting me for a specific post. I was disappointed, and at the same time a little relieved. Because what this meant was that it was *me* that was Mr. Cheeseman's client, not some company. He was apparently working on my behalf.

"But how on earth did you come to pick me?" I asked.

He winked at me.

"Intelligence," he said. "Without blowing my own trumpet, so to speak, I've got the best intelligence network in the country—no, let's be fair—in the Western World. Talk about your CIA and your SOE. If they'd had me in the Second World War, it would have ended a year early."

I had to admit that I liked him. You couldn't help it. He was so far removed from the usual smooth, buttery types that grease

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their way around the city.

"There's been a Cheeseman in this business for over one hundred and fifty years," he said. "Now come on, admit it, you're impressed."

I was, and I admitted it.

"And well you might be. Cheeseman is a force to be reckoned with. I am the steam in the turbine. The oil in the machinery."

"The Wind in the Willows," I said flippantly, and regretted it immediately.

He looked at me consideringly and finished chewing the last of his steak-and-kidney before he spoke.

"I'm glad to see you have a sense of humour, young Mr. Fowler, and a great asset it must be in your world of management, but I have always believed that it is something to be consumed with moderation."

I said I was sorry. And indeed I was. I had glimpsed steel beneath that genial exterior, and somehow it frightened me. He waved off my apologies as the waiter came to clear our plates and to present us with the pudding menus.

I said, "But I'm not sure that I can afford you, you know."

He smiled.

"'Course you can. Flat fee, I charge. One month's salary, payable by cheque, one month after you take up your new position. That's reasonable, ain't it?"

I had to agree that it was.

He said he didn't believe in big offices.

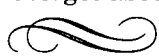
"I can't be doing with all that palaver and paperwork, faxes and phones and whatnot, fancy carpets and fancy tarts. Who am I going to impress? My job's out here in the streets, in other people's offices, with my people, people like you."

And sure enough, when he gave me his card, all it contained was his name and a telephone number.

"But don't bother ringing it, 'cos as like as not I shan't be there. I like being out and about."

I arrived back at the office to find that a meeting had been started without me, and that my secretary had gone home with a migraine, and that there were five or six urgent calls to deal with. So I was plunged back into my humdrum, unexciting world, and within a day or two, I forgot about the heady prospects which Mr. Cheeseman had painted for me. In fact, I forgot about Mr. Cheeseman.

But Mr. Cheeseman didn't forget about me.



From my hide, and lying on my bed, I can see, through the grimy window, the towers and turrets of the City. It looks, if I half-close my eyes, exactly like a medieval castle against the evening sky.

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There is just the occasional lighted window where chamberlains and chancellors plot, where the princes, the dukes, and nobles are in council, deciding our lives and destinies for us.

But below, far below, there are the dark, unlit passages, the sombre, dripping, noisome alleys, the gutters and rat-runs of the castle that is the City.

It is down there that Mr. Cheeseman runs with his pack. And it is down there that I will find him.

Four weeks to the day after that first meeting, my secretary rang through to say, in a rather disapproving voice, that there was a Mr. Cheeseman on the line, that she didn't know who he was, and in her voice was the plain statement that I shouldn't have no-matter-who ringing me when she didn't know about them. I forgave her, because Janice is a very nice woman, if sometimes overprotective.

Mr. Cheeseman was brusque on the line. No pleasantries for him, no passing the time of day and how's-the-family for Mr. C.

"Got something for you. An opening. Interested?"

I said it depended.

"I know it depends, don't I? But are you, in principle, interested or are you not?" He sounded quite nettled.

I said yes, I was interested. Then he explained that an opening had just occurred with IPC, a large multinational with headquarters in London. He explained the post, which was better-paid and was slightly higher in the organisation than my present one, and I had to admit that it sounded exactly like my cup of tea.

"So it should be. I picked it for you. What Cheeseman says, Cheeseman does."

"But," I said doubtfully, "everybody and his uncle will be after that job. It sounds perfect."

"Never you mind about that," he said. "You let me worry about that. You just go round and get yourself interviewed, and Bob's your uncle."

I was, quite frankly, sceptical. But two days later, I went for the interview with the managing director, at the huge offices in King William Street, and a week later they told me I had the job.

I couldn't believe it. Nor could my colleagues, who had got so used to me as an office fixture that they found it very hard to believe that this unexciting colleague was striking outwards and upwards. I signed my resignation with very mixed emotions, and it was done. I was moving.

And the new job fit me like a glove. It was as if it had been made for me. To a good manager, a new position is never a problem. It's usually simply a question of learning new systems, and quite

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frankly, most companies are pretty much the same. Within a week, my office seemed like home and it felt as though I had always been there.

One thing intrigued me, and I posed the question one day at lunch in the Directors' Lounge. (I wasn't actually a director, but I was upper management and Rank Hath Its Privileges).

I asked the managing director, a man I had immediately liked, where my predecessor had gone. He put down his knife and fork.

"Nowhere, in fact. Or perhaps that depends on your beliefs. He had an accident. Rather a nasty one, I'm afraid. He was repairing his car himself—always was a bit of a do-it-yourself nut—car slipped off the jack. He died in hospital two days later. Just shows how careful you have to be."

I was appalled, and I was even more shaken when I mentioned it to my secretary, Liz, who promptly burst into tears.

"Mr. Gough was such a nice man," she wept, "and he was so happy here. He'd had all kinds of offers to go to other companies, but he just wouldn't. He always said he felt at home here, he liked everybody here and he just wanted to stay. He was so quiet. Never any trouble."

I gave her the afternoon off. I was rather abashed that I had raised the subject. We never spoke of him again, by unspoken agreement.

I saw Mr. Cheeseman just once, in my fourth week. He had popped in to collect his cheque, for one month's salary, and I was only too pleased to give it to him. He winked at me as he took it.

"As promised. Results guaranteed. What Cheeseman says, Cheeseman does."

And that was it. I got my head down and concentrated on getting my head round a new job, and a new life, because that's what it felt like. It felt as though I had been paddling about in a stagnant backwater and now I was swimming in a strong, bracing, refreshing current.

Then, three months later, out of the blue, Liz rang me to say that there was a Mr. Cheeseman on the line for me. I was forced even after that comparatively short time to remind myself just who Mr. Cheeseman was. Was he from the Amsterdam operation? Then, of course, I remembered.

"Mr. Cheeseman," I said, "nice to hear from you again."

"Likewise," he said. "Job all right? No problems?"

I assured him that everything was just hunky-dory and that I couldn't be more grateful to him.

"Just so," he said. And then he asked me to meet him that evening for a drinkie. That's what he said, a little drinkie. I didn't know, really, whether I wanted a little drinkie with Mr. Cheeseman, but after all, this was the man who had shown me the way out of my backwater, so it was the least I could do.

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He collected me from the office that night and drove us out of the City, taking the South Circular round to Battersea. We ended up in a little area which calls itself Spencer Park. He parked outside an imposing house, got out, and said, "Come on."

The place was dark, and he didn't bother to switch any of the lights on, but led me through to what appeared to be a study. He pulled the curtains before switching on a number of table lamps, closed the door, and finally turned to me and said, "Sit you down, young Mr. Fowler."

So I sat down. The room was evidently a male preserve. It smelled of pipe smoke, and there were two leather armchairs and a sofa, also in leather. There was a desk, and bookcases flanking a large fireplace. There was also a large buffet containing a drinks tray. He poured two whiskies without asking me what I wanted to drink, handed me a glass, and sat down himself on the sofa. He hadn't taken off his raincoat.

He looked at me and raised his glass.

"Here's looking at you," he said, and took a healthy swig.

I returned the toast.

"So," he said. "We're happy in our new little nest, are we then, Bill?"

"Very happy," I said.

"Good."

Then he fell silent for a moment, staring into his glass. I got up and looked around. There was a sideboard to my left, covered with photographs in silver frames.

"Your family?" I said.

"No, no."

"Ah." I was a bit nonplussed. "Well, I must say, I like your house."

He set his drink down on a side table, folded his hands in his lap, and stared at me. Then he smiled that astonishing, youthful smile.

"Bill. I've got a lot to say to you and I would really prefer it if you sat down. So, come on, park it."

So I sat. There was something in his manner that worried me.

He said, "I don't live here. This is not my home."

"So—all right," I said, "why are we here?"

"We're here because I wanted you to have a sniff around the place."

"What do you mean, a sniff?" Now he had me seriously concerned.

He paused and regarded me as if he were looking at me for the first time. Then he took his glass and sipped the whisky.

"Bill. How do you think of the City?"

I was a little thrown. "The City?"

"Yes. The City. The world of commerce. The whole—" he formed a globe in the air with his hands, "the whole thing."

I said I didn't know how I thought of it. To be honest, I was

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becoming a little irritated with him. What the hell was I doing here with this mad undersized person, talking philosophy?

He sighed.

"I think of it as a body. A human body. You know, with muscles and limbs and heart and lungs. But most of all, with blood that circulates everywhere and keeps the whole thing going. And what's the blood that circulates round our body, the City, the commercial world? It's talent. Ability. And the free movement of ability is what makes the thing work. Always has been. Always will be."

"And?"

"What happens if there is a blockage, a thrombosis? The blood stops circulating. And part of the body starts to die. If the blockage stays there too long, in your leg, say, then the result is gangrene. The body commences to rot. My job is to clear those blockages. You could think of me as a sort of cardiovascular surgeon."

I was beginning to have a vague idea now.

"What are you telling me? That I was a blockage, what you kindly refer to as a thrombosis?"

He smiled again.

"You were. But you are no longer. We blasted you free, sent you circulating around, which allowed other blood to take your place and so on and so on."

I was prickling now, all over. I thought I could see what he was getting at, but I couldn't believe what I was thinking.

"So—you're saying that there is a blockage now. And who is it?"

"The man who owns this house."

"And why am I here?"

"You are going to remove the blockage."

I decided to humour him; to go along with what I thought was an example of his black humour.

"How am I supposed to remove him?"

He shrugged.

"Up to you, really. Normally, what works best is a household accident of some kind. Gas, electricity, they're usually pretty well tried and true. You could try something with his car, but that usually requires a little technical knowledge. Best left alone unless you're sure."

I gaped at him.

"Let me get this straight. You're actually asking me to—to kill this bloke?"

He looked at me as though I were an idiot child who had at last realised that two and two made four.

"Well, yes. What else? Mr. Wadsworth is in a pivotal position, resists all attempts to move him, and he is blocking any movement in or out of his level. He's causing all manner of problems. He must be moved. Removed. Like Mr. Gough."

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I really believed now that I was in the presence of a madman.

He smiled at me again.

"Come now, young Mr. Fowler. You didn't really believe that plum jobs like yours just *happen,* did you?"

"You mean—?" I had a horrid feeling in my stomach.

"I mean that for the good of all, your predecessor, Mr. Gough, had to be moved. He was resisting all offers, he insisted on remaining where he was, and he was blocking the free flow of ability."

"But if he simply wanted to stay where he was happy?"

"Ah—happiness. That's something, isn't it? But don't you think we have a duty to others, to move upwards, and outwards, when we can, to make way for others? Of course we do. You, for instance; you occupied your old job for years and years, far beyond your natural span. And in doing so, you were blocking other people from moving upwards and onwards. I really did fear greatly for you at one point."

"And so you removed Mr. Gough?"

"Not me personally, of course. It's all hands to the pump in my business. But yes, Mr. Gough was removed. Some sort of accident with his car, I believe. Very sad."

"And now you expect me to do the same."

"Well, yes. Like everyone else. Nothing is for nothing. You've got your job. We've got you moving, the blockage is cleared. And I've no doubt you'll go on moving. But now, it's payback time, Bill. I'm a little disappointed, I must admit; very few ever show the slightest hesitation. Most seem to understand the necessity for free movement. I have to say, I've been very gratified."

"Most? Who do you mean by 'most'? Most of who?"

"Most of the people I've helped in the course of a long and successful career," he said.

I had a sudden vision of an anthill, of thousands of orchestrated movements, one ant taking the place of another, an infinite series of intricate dance steps, and if one ant refused to move, the others moved in on him and—well, removed him. Mr. Cheeseman was nodding and smiling at me exactly as if he were seeing the pictures that were crowding my brain.

"And what about the minority? The ones who don't want to do as you ask?"

He twinkled at me.

"Well, then, they have to be moved along as well, don't they?"

I gaped at him.

"Let me get this straight," I said. "You create vacancies by—removing people—and then the people you place in those jobs have to *create* other vacancies for you in return for having been found a job in the first place?"

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"Awkwardly put, but you've got the idea, Bill. Perfectly circular, isn't it? And it works. It works for everybody. The greater good, do you see? My good. Your good. Everybody's good."

"And just what gives you the right?"

"Not a question of right," he said. "I'm simply it. I'm here, and I do what I have to do."

"Killing what—dozens, scores of people every year?"

He made a little face.

"Oh, now," he said, "let's not exaggerate. Lots of people move on of their own accord. I've got normal clients. It's the troublesome ones I have to help out a little. I spot the people who can't or won't move, and I give them a little push. If they will move, that's good, if they won't—" he shrugged.

"And I suppose all the people you *place* act as your intelligence network. And as your—" I couldn't find the word.

"Executive arm? That's exactly right." He was beaming at me as if I were his star pupil.

"Well," I said, "the answer is no."

He stared at me with real surprise.

"You're a strange one, you are, Bill. I had an idea I was going to have problems with you." He was silent for a few moments. Then he sighed suddenly. "Well, trot along. And consider your position. I'll ring you."

"Don't bother." I said, and I picked up my coat and briefcase and left. I had a long walk to the nearest station and that was a good thing, because I needed some cool air and a long think.

Sometimes, when I'm under stress, I have a particular kind of migraine. I don't get a headache, but the first sign is a weird kind of chessboard pattern that gradually occludes my left eye until I'm unable to see anything out of it at all. It's an opthalmic migraine and it's very common. More worrying is that it affects some parts of the cognitive centres. I feel disoriented, I have trouble remembering names, words of common everyday things, I have short-term memory problems: who I'm with, what I'm doing, and so on.

Walking to the Tube, I had exactly the same sort of feeling as when I am troubled with my migraine. Only this time, I had no problems of vision. But I did have an intense feeling of disorientation, as if I were walking sideways. I was looking at posters without understanding, and when the ticket-seller asked me for my money I pawed through my small change without recognizing the coins.

It was just as bad when I got home. Mr. Cheeseman had turned my world on its head, and I could not find my place in it. I could not, for the life of me, find my balance. The worst thing was that it was all so horribly plausible. It could actually be that someone—and why not Mr. Cheeseman—cleared blockages in the commercial world. We've all seen people who hung onto their jobs for far

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longer than they should . . . just one blockage in a pivotal place in a large company, I could see, might affect the lives of tens, scores, hundreds of others, preventing movement up and sideways in that vast three-dimensional network that is a commercial city.

But—murder? It wasn't really possible, was it? On the contrary, I was sure that Mr. Cheeseman was deadly serious. And behind him, there were scores, hundreds of people whose way he had *unblocked* and who were willing to repay the favour. I wondered, in passing, just how high Mr. Cheeseman's writ ran. You did hear odd things in the City, this or that chairman suffering an accident, a fall at home, or a minor stroke, or this or that marketing executive in a ski accident.

Come to think of it, the managing director had given me the thumbs-up remarkably quickly, hadn't he? Was he a Cheeseman alumnus? Even more horrible was the idea that came to me, in the middle of a sleepless night, that I had been selected for Gough's job even before he had had his "accident" to make room for me. So that someone else could take my place and so on and so on. Movement. . . .

The whole thing was so outrageous and yet so convincing that I slept hardly at all that night. When I did, it was to dream of ants in bowler hats and to jerk awake, bathed in sweat. I arrived late and logy at the office the next morning to find a pile of messages for me, three of which were from Mr. Cheeseman.

I ignored them, put them aside on a corner of the desk. I told Janice that I didn't want any calls from Mr. Cheeseman, that she was to say I was out of the office, out of the country, anything. I needed time to think.

In the following days, that little pile of pink message slips grew at an alarming rate. He was ringing at least three times a day. Liz began to get rather tetchy.

"Mr. Gough took all his calls. Always," she said tartly.

Well, good for Mr. Gough, and look where it had got him.

Then, after about a week, the calls stopped. One morning, there were no pink message slips for me. Strangely, I felt lost. Abandoned. But relieved. Mr. Cheeseman had clearly given up on me. I also felt a bit guilty. I should have taken one of his calls at least. If only to tell him to leave me alone.

What I did, of course, and it's something I do a lot, was to consign Mr. Cheeseman to the back of one of my mental filing cabinets. Mistake.

Sometimes, staring out of the grimy window after a fruitless day of hunting, of lying in wait by the trap, I wonder if I have hallucinated the whole thing, Mr. Cheeseman, my "accidents." Perhaps I

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have dreamt the whole thing up, misunderstood, misinterpreted. Perhaps I have suffered some sort of brain disturbance that has sent my mind reeling out of kilter into an imaginary world peopled by faceless assassins.

But then I think back and know it is all true. Cheeseman does exist, and so do *They.* And, make no mistake, *They* are still looking for me, and they're clever and cunning. They could still pick up my trail. They won't stop simply because I've dropped out of sight. My problem is to find Cheeseman before They find me. And what if the trap doesn't work? No, I can't afford to think like that. It must work . . . it must.

After two weeks of deafening silence from Mr. Cheeseman, I had two shocks on the same day. I was standing on the platform in the Underground station at Bank. I was leafing through the *Evening Standard,* as were at least fifty other men of my age and stripe. It's something you just do. I read the latest dire cricket news—England collapsing again—and then a small item caught my eye. *Tragic Death in Battersea—Freak Accident Costs City Man's Life.* I don't know, perhaps before I even turned to page two I had an inkling. But there it was. Roger Wadsworth, 47, an executive with Trans-European Finance, had died in what they always *love* to call a freak accident at his home in Spencer Park. Apparently the late lamented Mr. Wadsworth had failed to turn off his gas oven properly. He had fallen asleep in front of the television (see our article on executive stress—P12) and the lower floor of the house had slowly filled with carbon monoxide. He had died of intoxication. A senior fire officer was interviewed and gave his views on the necessity for regular inspections of gas installations and ventilation. There was always a certain amount of unburnt gas in any gas appliance, and if the ventilation system was faulty, you could—as in the case of the unfortunate Mr. Wadsworth—find yourself fatally intoxicated.

I was cold all over. I thought—no, that's the wrong word. I couldn't think. A dozen useless thoughts chased round and round. It was an accident. But I had been in his house. Mr. Cheeseman had asked me to kill him. Coincidence. It must be coincidence. After all, coincidences existed, otherwise we wouldn't have a word for them. And even while part of my brain was rationalising all this, another part was saying, *No, it's true, they killed him.*

The approaching train made all our newspapers flutter. I folded mine in unison with fifty others and stepped forward. There was quite a crush, I noticed with yet another part of my brain. The train cleared the tunnel slowly with a screech of brakes. As it drew up towards my part of the platform, there was a surge behind me.

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I felt a sharp dig in my back. I tried to turn and protest, but the crush was too great and the digging pain was growing more insistent and then became a definite push. I was thrust suddenly towards the edge of the platform. There were cries of alarm from everyone around me. The train was upon me and I was teetering on the edge with the sharp thing still pushing; I threw out a desperate hand and hit the rounded corner of the train. I had just a glimpse of the driver's panic-stricken look and then I was spinning with the momentum, falling, thank God, away from the train, cannoning into the people behind me. Then I was lying painfully on the platform. The aftermath didn't last long and was very British. Some people helped me to my feet, offered helpful comments, sympathy, and stern advice. But most of them, after a quick glance, were scrambling onto the train.

A young type stayed with me. He was tall, bowler-hatted, with a gingery look, round about my age. He said, "You had a lucky escape there, if you don't mind me saying so." I didn't. I was still brushing off my suit and feeling myself for bruises.

"Really ought to take more care," he said. "You read of such nasty things happening these days."

"You do," I agreed. "Thanks anyway."

"Sure you're all right?" he said. I assured him I was. He flourished his umbrella and walked away down the platform. I stared after him. An umbrella in August?

I summoned up that concerned ginger face spoiled by a pair of rather slatey eyes. "You read of so many nasty things," he had said.

You do indeed.

I didn't go home by Underground that night. I left the station, sought out the nearest pub, and consumed three large scotches in quick succession, and then found a taxi to take me home to Ealing.

That night, I lay in bed with yet another scotch and stared sightlessly at the little portable television which nowadays keeps me company upstairs.

Accidents happen, I thought. You should be more careful. People are always falling under Tube trains. But. *But.* Mr. Cheeseman had taken me to Wadsworth's house and had asked me to kill him. Then he had stopped asking me. And now Wadsworth was dead. Conclusion: Mr. Cheeseman had found somebody else to do it. Corollary—I was the rogue ant, the one who knew too much. I had made a deal with Mr. Cheeseman, and I had refused to live up to what he saw as my side of the bargain. So now I was fair game.

But City executives die like everyone else, I told myself. You read about it all the time. What you don't read about are headhunting organisations who kill people to make room for their clients. You don't read about mysterious gnomes who inhabit the wainscot of the City, controlling the ebb and flow of executive

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movements. "I am a force of nature," Mr. Cheeseman had said.

Move, fight, win. If you didn't, if you couldn't, you were removed—you died under a Tube train, or you lay on your sofa slowly purpling as the gas seeped into your blood and brain and the television hissed mindlessly. If you could believe all that, then you could believe anything. But if you *could* believe all that, then you could also believe that any member of the wolf pack who refused to kill would also be regarded as useless and dangerous. And expendable.

With that first "accident," I entered a nightmare month. The next thing that happened was just after I came back from three days in Geneva. We'd had an exhausting series of meetings, and I think I must have been half asleep when the cab dropped me outside the house at about half-past nine. It was very strange. The street was pitch-dark, there were no lights on in the other houses.

"Oy-oy," said the cabbie cheerfully, "looks like there's a power-cut round your parts. Just the thing to come home to, isn't it?"

I could have killed him for his cheerfulness. I had been thinking about the bath I was going to have all the way from the airport.

As soon as I walked into the house I could smell it. Gas. The hall was full of it. I set down my bags. I opened the hall cupboard and found the torch I always keep there. I walked through to the kitchen. As I opened the door the smell made me gag. I went across and unlocked and opened the kitchen door. The whole place smelled of it. I went around the house, opening every window I could find. Then I went back to the kitchen and inspected the gas stove. One tap was half-closed. Not much, but enough over three days to fill the entire house.

I went into the lounge and poured a large scotch and waited for the gas to dissipate.

Had I really been that stupid? Leaving a gas-tap half-off isn't my normal style. But then, when was the last time I had used the oven? I couldn't remember.

The power came back on at about eleven o'clock: I could suddenly see the streetlights flicker and start to warm up. I switched on a couple of table lamps. By then I had closed all the doors and windows, and I went to the kitchen to reset the central heating to get some water for a bath. I switched on the kitchen light. There was a brief flash from the ceiling and that was all. I thought at first that the bulb had blown, but when I pointed my torch up at the fitting, I could see there was no glass bulb, just a filament. Glass crunched under my feet. I found that they had done the same with the hall light. They had been extremely clever, and I had been extremely lucky. The one thing that could have saved me had happened.

Normally, you walk into a house, what do you do? Your instinct

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is to turn on the light. If the place happens to be full of gas, and hanging from the hall ceiling is a bare filament with a little copper wire across it—*fizzle—Boom.* No questions asked. *Gas Leak Turned Executive's House Into Time-Bomb, Inquest Told.*

The next day when I arrived at the office, my first call was to Mr. Cheeseman. There was no answer. He was out there somewhere, but he wasn't talking to me.

Nonetheless, I gave Liz a standing instruction to ring Mr. Cheeseman's number every morning and afternoon without fail. But he was never there, or he simply didn't answer. All my experience of Mr. Cheeseman told me that the number he had given me had probably been changed by now or had never even existed. Telephone companies have managers as well, you know.

He wasn't talking to me, but he was thinking about me. They had several tries at me in the following weeks. Either God had taken a shine to me or the Devil recognised me as one of his own, because I had the most incredible luck.

First of all, walking along Cheapside one morning, I avoided by inches being jostled into the path of a double-decker bus, and you know the sort of speed they do down there even at rush hour.

Then, two days later, I came downstairs in the night to get a drink of water from the bottle I always kept in the fridge. The fridge light hadn't worked for some time and I was only warned by the pungent smell when the lip of the bottle was millimetres from my mouth. A particularly vicious brand of drain cleaner. I double-checked my shopping after that. I changed supermarkets every two or three days, and I never took the same route.

They seemed to take a breather after that, because it was a full five days later that a block of concrete fell from the fifth-floor cornice of a newly built development in Poultry, missing me by a bare couple of feet.

I stopped going home in the rush hour. I stayed in the office late. I spent two hours going round the house when I got home and then an hour smelling and testing everything I was going to eat. And all that was beginning to tell on me. I was sweating continually and I had begun to talk to myself quite a lot.

Careful as I was, they almost caught me off my guard the following week. Again, I was only saved by luck. The light in the bathroom had gone and I was up on a stepladder unscrewing the flush fitting in the ceiling. The stepladder trembled a little and I lost hold of the screwdriver. As luck would have it, it fell plumb across the two bath taps which in my old-fashioned bath are separate. There was an almighty bang and a flash. I still had the image of the screwdriver on my retina two days later. I pulled out the wooden bath surround and crawled under with a torch. And there I found two electric wires artfully bared and curled "accidentally" round the

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hot and cold water pipes. *Freak Accident Costs City Man Life.*

I began to realise that my luck really couldn't hold out. I had to be lucky all the time. They just had to be lucky once. And they could get in anywhere, it seemed, nowhere was safe, and they had lots of talent and lots of ideas. They had a thousand ways of creating a fatal accident.

And just to prove the point, when I opened the window of my office two days after that, the whole window fell out into the void, as near as dammit pulling me after it, to shatter like a bomb in the central court seven floors below. Metal fatigue, the building manager said. Well, I was fatigued as well. And fed up. And frightened.

I had had enough.

I spent that evening at the office, clearing as much of my work as I could. As I left, I popped a letter into the receptionist's message tray. It was a letter to the managing director, in which I told him that I could not carry on, that my personal life was coming apart at the seams, and that I needed to take a year to sort myself out. God knows what he would make of it. It read like the work of a man very much at the end of his tether. But I was careful not to make it sound like the suicide note it very definitely wasn't. I didn't want well-meaning people coming after me, making inquiries, worried about my mental state.

At home, I ate quickly and then went up to the loft. I took down an old hold-all that I had always meant to give to Oxfam. It was packed with old, crumpled clothes, jackets, trousers, a raincoat, even a battered old trilby; most things were torn in at least one place, some were stained with paint. I put aside the oldest and most disreputable I could find, and tossed the rest back up into the loft.

I packed the bag with this selection. I added washing and shaving things—then, on reflection, I discarded them. I didn't think I'd need them.

Then I went downstairs to the sitting room, took out my last remaining bottle of Talisker, and tried my best to drink myself to sleep. It didn't work. My brain was too busy.

The next day, bleary-eyed, with my head spinning from the whisky and the lack of sleep, I closed up the house, turned off gas, electricity, and water, and left, climbing across and through the back gardens, at half-past five. I looked as I usually do, I suppose, except I clearly hadn't shaved and I looked generally as though I had spent a night on a park bench.

I took the first train I could get to the City, got out at the Barbican, and then started to walk. It had begun to rain, and I was heartily glad. The downpour soaked my raincoat and my hat, and I began to feel like a homeless vagrant—which, now, in fact, I suppose I was.

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By noon, I had found the hide I was looking for: a seedy bed-and-breakfast place in a run-down dead-end street in Clerkenwell. The landlord, Mulligan ("Call me Pat if you like, but never, ever, call me after nine o'clock at night"), was an equally seedy, run-down individual with a cigarette forever clinging to his lower lip, which accounted for his emphysemic wheezing. He told me that there were two other tenants, but in my time there I saw neither hide nor hair of them. I heard weird shuffling sounds late at night, but that was all.

I paid Mulligan in advance, for a month—and that opened his eyes a bit. He didn't often get clients like me. But then cash was the least of my problems.

I hoped, looking round the room with its peeling wallpaper, its miserable rickety sticks of furniture, and the lumpy bed complete with stained counterpane, that it wasn't going to take me a month to do what I had to do.

I stayed in that room for a good four days, waiting for my beard to grow. I didn't wash, either, and found out how grimy you can become in just a few days if you don't wash. I ate in the greasy little cafe across the road, and I brought in drink from the little off-licence market on the corner. I spent a couple of nights drinking heavily, and at the end of four days, when I looked at myself in the mirror of the dirty little communal bathroom, I almost didn't recognise myself. I was white, horribly thin, with a dirty beard, greasy, lank hair, and great bags under each bloodshot eye.

Now, I thought, I was ready.

I dressed in the oldest, dirtiest clothes I had, put on the raincoat and trilby, and went out into the city.

I reckoned I had a couple of weeks or so before Cheeseman walked into the trap I had laid for him. In the meantime, I was going to make myself part of the street furniture. I headed for the IPC office—well, not the office exactly, but first of all the small cafe across the road from the office. There were also two or three pubs, and a small public garden with benches. By alternating between these three, I could keep a constant eye on the front door of the office building.

Sooner or later, I knew, Mr. Cheeseman was going to walk into that building. Why? Well, there was a job empty, wasn't there? One of their managers had just walked out without warning. There was a Sit. Vac. across there, and I knew as sure as anything that Mr. Cheeseman would soon be choosing a candidate.

He'd be going in to see the managing director. Or if not, or if I somehow missed him the first time, one day he'd certainly be going in to collect his month's commission.

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All I had to do was sit by the hole and wait for his nose to pop out. And then—well, then we would see.

So for two weeks, as it turned out, I made myself part of the street. I became a regular in the cafe, having cups of tea and sandwiches in the morning until the proprietor made noises. I wasn't exactly the sort of client that would bring in the others, you see. At opening time, I went into one of the pubs. One of them, the Golden Lion, had a perfect window view of the office door, and there I sat with my pint or half-pint until the landlord became equally fed up with me. The rest of the time, I went into the little park and lolled on the benches. I had taken to carrying round a Safeway's carrier bag stuffed with newspapers. It seemed to be part of the role.

And every night, when the office door was closed, I went back to my lair, sometimes with the empty panicky feeling that it was all useless. At other times, I reflected uneasily that I could grow used to this aimless, unstructured life of the street-dweller. Except, of course, I *did* have an aim: to collar a small, smoothly dressed headhunter with a sideline in murder.

Then one day, and I could hardly believe it, at a few minutes before half-past six, Mr. Cheeseman walked jauntily and quickly down the steps of the office building, and turned left into Gracechurch Street.

And we were off.

I was praying that he was finished for the day. I had also banked on Mr. Cheeseman not living far from the City. In fact, I was gambling on a whole lot of things. If he took off in his car, I was done for. But it seemed my luck was in and that he was on foot. But he went at a hell of a lick. I hadn't realised just how my recent life had taken it out of me. By the end of fifteen minutes I was wheezing like Mulligan.

He led me a merry dance, in and out, down and around all the little side streets and alleys, some of which I had never even heard of. I caught the occasional glimpse of a landmark—the Monument, the Tower, and so on—but really I had no idea where we were. Mr Cheeseman did, that was clear. But then, so he should, this was his hunting ground.

A couple of times, I thought he might have spotted me as I came round a corner a little too quickly, but he never paused. Until he reached a restaurant, where clearly he was going to dine, and I was left hanging about in the street like an idiot for two hours.

I had no idea of where we were going. All I knew was that we were heading vaguely east, and that I wasn't going to let go. And when he finally came out of the restaurant and struck off again, I was ready.

After a dizzying series of turns and loops, down the thin, canyonlike back-doubles, we emerged on the docksides. Standing

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alone in the deserted, ruined landscape was a tall, dirty-looking building that had once clearly formed part of the wharf, and which had somehow escaped the development madness that has crept through the old abandoned docks.

Cheeseman headed straight for it, galloped up the stairs that led to what had been the main door, and disappeared inside. Lights immediately came on.

And I followed him.

The inside was completely empty, lit by bare bulbs, a warehouse that had at one time, my nose told me, held coffee. To my right was a flight of stone steps that led downwards. Well, there was nowhere else to go. I went down the steps.

There was no sound down there, in the stone passage that led across the whole width of the warehouse. I tiptoed along, feeling slightly ridiculous and very exposed, and then came to a large door on my right. It was slightly ajar. I stared at it. This was it, was it?

I pushed it slightly and it opened immediately. I walked into Mr. Cheeseman's lair and gaped.

The room I was in ran the entire length of the warehouse above me, and was furnished like a cross between an Edwardian shipping office and a gentleman's club, beautifully carpeted, panelled in dark wood, and lit by table lamps, every one of which was brightly blazing. There were sofas and armchairs, acres of books, and even oil portraits of stern Victorian individuals on the walls.

To my right there was an enormous wooden desk, next to a large fireplace, beyond which, stretching the whole length of the right-hand wall, was a series of filing cabinets, ancient and wooden at the far end, modern and metal at this end. In one corner, there was what appeared from here to be a fairly new computer setup.

I stepped further into the room. He was here somewhere, I knew—except, where? I explored a bit, walking the length of the room, and there, beyond the filing cabinets, I discovered a small alcove with a door standing slightly ajar. A cool draught played on my face. So he wasn't here. And he'd been on to me. So why had he deliberately led me here?

He was a slippery little devil with a devious mind. But I was finally here, where he lived. He'd have to come back sometime, and I'd be ready for him. In the meantime, I'd have a good poke around. The filing cabinets first.

At the end of two hours I had it all, and it was amazing.

The filing cabinets were packed to bursting with information. Every company I had ever heard of, and lots more that I hadn't, were represented in great files, with individual files on every member of management from the highest to the lowest. How he managed it alone, I don't know, but each file was continually being

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brought up-to-date in Mr. Cheeseman's tiny, neat handwriting. There were pages of notes on each executive, there were faxes, memos, CVs, even photographs—the intelligence system was extraordinary. He had everything on everybody, even down to their family pets and the brand of whisky they drank. There might have been a hundred thousand personal files there, perhaps more.

There was one filing cabinet marked "Disposals" which I hadn't looked into because I knew what I would find.

The records went back at least a hundred years. I had concentrated on the contemporary files, but a brief glance into the yellow pages in the old wooden filing cabinets had revealed the same sort of records from the 1800s, handwritten, of course.

It was a mammoth business that he was running here. Clearly, he had, at one time, thought of computerising all this, to make life easier. But one glance into the hard-disk drive had shown me that nothing had been started.

I sat at the desk with a glass of Mr. Cheeseman's whisky and considered the room with something like a frisson of excitement. This was where all the powerlines ended up. What must it be like, sitting here, in his little kingdom, pushing the buttons that sent people out of old jobs, into new jobs, and sometimes into the infinite?

The phone rang. I stared at it. It kept on ringing. Finally, I picked it up and said, "Hello?"

"Hello, young Bill." Of course, it was him. "Had a good look round, have you? Sorry I couldn't stay to say hello personally."

"That's all right," I said. "Perhaps some other time."

He laughed. I thought he sounded a little weary.

"Well, I'll say this for you, young Bill, you're good, you're very good. I knew there was something about you the first time I clapped eyes on you. And me—well, I'm getting old, or I'd have spotted you long before I did."

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm a long way from there, young Bill, don't you fret. So, you've had a look round, have you? Well, what do you think?"

"It's impressive," I said, "but it's a bit of a mess."

"Well, yes, I suppose. But we can't all be like you, can we? Tell you what it is, Bill, I'm tired. I don't have the energy I used to have. When I first started there, I was much younger, with a bit of go. But that was thirty years ago. And my name wasn't Cheeseman then, either. So what are we going to do with you, Bill Fowler?"

"You've been trying your best to do *away* with me for long enough."

"Yes, I know. But that's just business. And you can't go on like that, you know."

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"Oh? And why not?"

"Because they're going to get you sooner or later. You've been very lucky, young Bill. But it won't last. And look at you now. You're an outcast. Nowhere to go, no job. You carry on like you are and there's only one possible result."

I kept quiet. He was right.

"But you see, now you happen to be in the one place where you can't be got. And you can take matters into your own hands."

"What does that mean?"

"Bill, open the top right-hand drawer." I did as he said. Inside was an old, thin ledger. On top of it was a revolver.

"Now then, Bill, you can save yourself a lot of bother, a lot of stress and drawn-out worrying. See, I'm getting too old for these fun and games. I've had thirty years of it and I'm getting a bit worn round the edges."

I looked at the revolver. It was loaded and shone from a recent oiling.

From curiosity, I opened the ledger. There they were, all the Cheesemans, starting with the spidery copperplate of Albert (1847-1883) and ending thirty lines down with the neat signature of Wilfred (1965-). *My* Mr. Cheeseman.

"Do you think you're up to it, Bill? I tell you, I'm too tired to go on chasing you all over the shop. And there's the easy way out for both of us, if you're man enough."

I didn't say anything. I was tired, too. More tired than I had ever been.

"I think you're up to it, Bill. I think you've got the resource and I know you've got the guts. And it'll be ever so easy, you'll see. Just do it. And don't worry, I'll make all the arrangements."

"Yes," I croaked, my heart lurching. "I'll do it."

"Good man, Bill, you've made the right decision. I knew I could rely on you. Well, we won't be speaking again. So, nice to have known you and toodle-oo." There was a click and he was gone. Just like that.

I stayed at the desk for half an hour, staring in front of me. I knew what Mr. Cheeseman wanted, and he was right. There *was* a way out. And I *was* up to it. And it was the only answer that made any sense.

The phone rang again. And rang. And rang. I hesitated for a whole minute, and then, with a curious mixture of fear and sick excitement bubbling up inside me, I picked up the phone.

"Cheeseman speaking," I said, and, as I listened, I wrote my name on the next line in the ledger, below Wilfred: "William Cheeseman (2001-)," and I looked around the little kingdom I was inheriting. A kingdom into which I was going to bring some efficiency and order, proper systems and professional management.

Well, after all, that's my business. I'm a manager. ●

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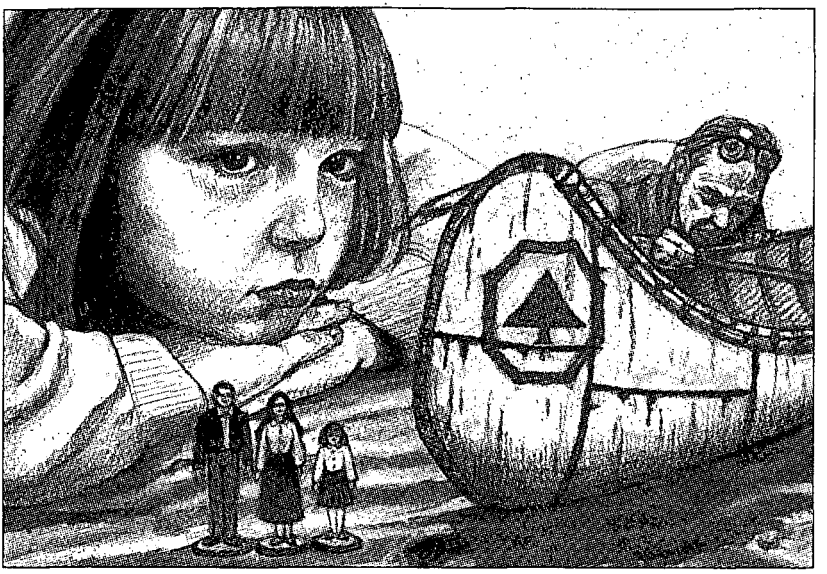

Art by Laurie Harden

Death of a Penobscot Princess

by Stefanie Matteson

NOVEMBER 2000

In a life that had reached almost the Biblical threescore and ten, Dick Thibodeau had had only two passions. The first was for birch-bark canoes. He'd first seen one hanging on the dining room wall of a local hotel as a teenager and been smitten by the elegant lines and beautiful workmanship. From there, it was only a small step to trying his hand at making one himself. Fifty years later, the enthusiasm still held him fast: Over the course of a lifetime, he'd probably made 150 or more and was considered one of the country's reigning experts in the nearly lost art. He made half a dozen canoes a year, which he sold for hefty fees to canoe enthusiasts who sought him out from all over the country.

His second passion was for his Christmas village, which he'd

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meticulously handcrafted over many years. The village was a miniature replica of the northern Maine village of Millville in which Thibodeau lived. It was the centerpiece of the village's Christmas celebration, and its installation at the library marked the opening of the holiday season. Dick Thibodeau liked working with wood: He liked the smell of it, the feel of it, the sense of working out a puzzle. As for his wife, well, even in her finer days—God rest her soul—she'd never managed to excite the passion in his breast that could be aroused by a straight-boled birch or a hackmatack knee. Which was why he spent most of his free time in his woodworking shop in the barn, where he now sat on a stool carving a center thwart, or cross brace, from a length of straight-grained birch.

Stefanie Matteson is the author of eight books in the Charlotte Graham mystery series published by Berkley Prime Crime. The germ of the idea for this new story, her second for *EQMM*, was a real-life murder that took place at a boatyard in Maine. Ms. Matteson's knowledge and appreciation of nature is evident in her work, as is her understanding of family relationships. ✝

It was no small wonder to Dick's friend Bunky Toothaker that, using only a crooked knife—a knife with an angle between handle and blade—he could produce a piece of lumber that looked as if it had been planed. And do it in less than an hour or so.

"I could do it a lot faster if I didn't have to listen to you battin' your gums," complained Thibodeau as he whittled away. But it was a good-natured gibe, for the two men had been friends for half a century.

Bunky arrived at Dick's wood shop nearly every afternoon for a cup of coffee and a jaw. He would sit in the rocker by the wood stove in his red flannel shirt and navy blue suspenders, smelling of chain-saw oil and sawdust. It was late November, the season for getting in the firewood. The hills that surrounded the lakeside village of Millville hummed with the buzz of chain saws, like a hive at the peak of spring bloom.

"How's it comin'?" Bunky asked of the canoe that Dick was now working on, whose hull rested upside down on wooden horses at the rear of the shop.

"Okay, I guess," replied Dick as the wood shavings piled up at his feet. "This is the last thwart. Then there's just the planking and ribbing."

The work on the canoe had begun several months before with the gunwales, which Dick had cut from cedar, laid out on the ground in the shape of a canoe, and surrounded with stakes to hold

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them in place. Once the gunwales had been shaped, they were laid over large sheets of wet birch bark, which were then folded up and held in place with more stakes. After this, the seams and cracks were sealed with asphalt (the one modern material Dick used, it being easier to work with than hot black-spruce gum) and the gunwales were carefully lashed to the hull with split spruce root.

The result was a roughly finished hull, which was the current stage of the project. The canoe would only take final shape with the mortising in of the thwarts and the completion of the interior. This was laid with split-cedar planking that was held in place against the roughly shaped bark by curved crosswise pieces called ribs.

Bunky rose, mug in hand, and walked over to inspect the hull. "Where'd you find such big sheets of bark?" he asked. "That old stand out by the town farm?"

"Nah," said Thibodeau, shaking his head. Laying down his knife, he stood up and opened the door of the wood stove. Then he scooped up the pile of wood shavings at his feet and tossed it into the belly of the stove. The flames leaped up in appreciation of the offering. After giving the fire a poke, he turned back to his stool.

"They're not big enough," he replied. He looked up at Bunky with a sly grin. "I have my sources." The local woods had been cut over so many times, it was hard to find any sizeable stands of birch, much less trees that were straight and clean. He had to venture farther afield; often he searched for weeks to find trees with good bark.

"Afraid I'll horn in on your territory?" teased Bunky with a chuckle, though they both knew there was no chance of that. Bunky's skills with wood didn't extend beyond the digital manipulation of a toothpick.

Dick looked up at him with an expression of scepticism.

"Afraid of the law, then?" Bunky speculated as he clumped back to his seat with his mug, the thumb of his free hand hooked in his suspender.

Thibodeau shook his head. The trees from which he took his bark were usually miles from a road; it was unlikely anyone would ever come after him for bark stealing.

The real reason Dick was reluctant to reveal his sources was more ineffable, and he said as much to Bunky. He thought of it as an affinity between himself and the tree. Like Longfellow's Hiawatha, he felt that the birch tree had offered its life and that the privacy of that offering should be respected.

In explanation, he recited the speech that Hiawatha had addressed to the tree from which he built his canoe: " 'I a light canoe will build me . . . That shall float on the river, like a yellow leaf in Autumn . . .' " He looked over at Bunky, then returned to his whittling. " 'Lay aside your cloak, O Birch-tree! Lay aside your white-skin wrapper . . .' "

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"What the hell is that?!" exclaimed Bunky.

"A quote from *Hiawatha*. The poem," Dick explained. "Thanking the tree for donating its bark."

Bunky harrumphed. Though he wasn't familiar with Longfellow, the answer was enough to satisfy him, and he turned without comment to the stove to refill his mug. He didn't go in for the philosophical. "When're you goin' to finish it up?"

"I'm aimin' for two weeks from now. Got to get to work on the Christmas village."

Thibodeau had started the Christmas village twenty years before with a single building: the Millville Church. It had taken him several months of evenings to make the replica, which was exact down to the smallest detail. The next year, he'd done the general store. The village now ran to thirty-two buildings.

"What're you goin' to add this year?" Bunky asked. Every year, Dick added another building or two, as well as the people to go along with them.

"The Berryman farm," he said, naming a picturesque farm on the outskirts of town. Then he looked over and smiled. "And I thought I'd add my house," he added. "My house and my barn. 'Bout time, wouldn't you say?"

Bunky's own house had been added seven years before, along with figures representing Bunky, his wife, and his two sons. Dick had even carved a replica of the family's golden retriever, Homer, and his doghouse.

"Long overdue," Bunky agreed.

13 MONTHS LATER—DECEMBER 2001

Dick Thibodeau's Christmas village was the marvel of Millville. Its installation in the spacious new community room at the library had brought a special luster to this Christmas season. Originally taking up a single four-by-eight sheet of plywood, the village had expanded to four such sheets, which were divided by aisles from which the townspeople could view the village more closely. It now took in not only the stores, garages, restaurants, churches, firehouse, library, town hall, railroad station, mill, and apartment houses of the central business district, but the outlying areas as well. Each structure was a 1/12-scale (an inch to a foot) replica of its real-life counterpart, right down to hinged doors and central staircases. The inhabitants of Millville had their miniature counterparts, too—or as close as Dick could come in figures a few inches high. As did their vehicles, which he built from models. One of the most intriguing aspects of the annual opening for the townspeople was seeing which figures had been added to the display—the new babies, the people who'd moved into town, the grown children who'd moved back—and which figures had been

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removed—those who had died or moved away.

It was this aspect of the Christmas village that had drawn nine-year-old Katie Thibodeau to the library that morning. Or so Alice Sanborn suspected. Alice was the librarian, and she'd seen Katie at the library every morning since the opening of the Christmas village the previous Sunday. Katie took a seat on one of the stools that were arrayed around the outside perimeter of the display. Then she carefully arranged the strap of her pink plastic purse diagonally across her shoulder and set the purse on her lap. After completing these adjustments, she pulled the stool up to the edge of the sheet of plywood and sat staring at the village for the next hour and a half, until she went home for lunch. Sometimes she would return in the afternoon.

Katie Thibodeau was Dick's granddaughter and the daughter of Dorrie Thibodeau, who had disappeared without a trace a year ago. As Alice had noted, it wasn't the Christmas village in general that held Katie's attention, but one aspect of it: the house she lived in and the figure representing her mother. Like many others, Alice had wondered if Dick would remove the figure of his daughter-in-law, which he'd added along with the Thibodeau house the previous year. It would seem to be touching on a painful nerve to leave it. But Dorrie was there, standing stiffly on the miniature back porch of the Thibodeau house with its miniature wooden rocking chairs, her hair fanned across the back of her ski parka. Her unusual straight black hair was said to come from a strain of Penobscot Indian blood; her people had been from Old Town, the site of the Penobscot Indian reservation. Next to her stood her husband, Larry, and the two children. They were watching Dick, who was working on a birch-bark canoe in the backyard, which also included a miniature woodpile—even a replica of the cart that Dick used to haul firewood. On further consideration, Alice realized that she really shouldn't have been surprised to see Dorrie's figure there. Though most of the town had given Dorrie up for dead, her father-in-law, who had loved Dorrie like the daughter he'd never had, had steadfastly refused to admit to himself that she was gone.

It had happened after the annual caroling on the village green the year before. Dorrie Thibodeau had simply disappeared. She had never shown up for her job on the night shift at the convenience store just off the Interstate. Some said she'd finally gotten fed up with her no-good husband and left. But those who knew her well said she never would have deserted her children, Katie and her younger brother Ned. Nor had she taken any of her belongings; everything had been left behind. Some speculated that criminals from out of state had abducted her in the store's parking lot, it being the belief of many in Millville that the Interstate had been an evil scheme on the part of big government to pollute their

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community with criminals, lunatics, and social misfits. But the majority believed that Larry Thibodeau, Dick's good-for-nothing only son, had killed his wife in a drunken rage and disposed of her body, probably dumped it in the Mill Stream inlet where the lake didn't freeze over. This suspicion was supported by the fact that Larry had fled town shortly after his wife's death, leaving the care of his children to their grandfather. If Larry had dumped Dorrie's body in the lake, it would most likely never be found, since it would have been carried by the current out into the center of the lake, where the depth was over a hundred feet. After a search that lasted six months, the state police had finally given up on finding Dorrie Thibodeau, or her body. Probably nobody would ever know what had happened to her: That was the sad part.

Katie Thibodeau stopped speaking on the day her mother disappeared. The school psychologist called her condition "childhood disintegrative disorder, not otherwise specified," which was just another way of saying that something was wrong but he didn't know what, other than the trauma caused by her mother's disappearance. Katie was a frequent visitor to the library, and Alice tried on these occasions to lure her back from the shadowland into which she had slipped. Alice thought that if she read aloud to her, Katie might be seduced into reciting the words—she had been a good reader before her mother's disappearance—and from there make the leap to speaking. But Alice's efforts had been to no avail, though she liked to think she was getting through in some small way.

From her post at the circulation desk, Alice now watched Katie as she sat on her stool clutching her pink plastic purse in her lap and staring unwaveringly at the figure of her mother, who was wearing a replica of the coat she'd been wearing when she disappeared: a yellow goose-down ski parka. Like the clothing of the other figures, it had been made by the local seamstress who helped Dick with the village, providing clothing and curtains and carpets—whatever wasn't made of wood.

There was something unnerving about the child sitting there.

Rising from her seat behind the desk, Alice went over to join her. "What do you see?" she asked quietly, hoping as always that the wall might crack. But the girl's profile, which was outlined against a sheet of shiny brown hair, was adamantine. There was no reply; she didn't even look around.

After standing at her side for a while, Alice returned to her desk. It was just after she had checked in the latest batch of video returns that she noticed with some amazement that Katie was no longer sitting down. She had set the purse on the floor and was now rearranging the figures in the Christmas village. Her short, chunky figure (she had yet to lose her baby fat) trotted back and forth in the aisles of the display with the brisk efficiency of a gar-

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dener tending her petunia beds.

This was against the rules, but since no one else was there, Alice didn't object. The rush of visitors had come earlier in the week when the village had opened. She figured that Katie had something of a proprietary interest, anyway, since her grandfather was the village's creator, and she also knew that the compulsion to arrange small objects in patterns was a symptom of childhood autism, the closest condition to which Katie's symptoms could be compared. The one autistic child she had known had spent hours arranging his matchbox cars in a pinwheel pattern as intricate as that of a rose medallion and couldn't bear to have a single car moved even a fraction of an inch. With Katie, it was the purse routine: It was their way of making order out of their disordered world.

Katie left ten minutes later. When she was gone, Alice went over to the display to view her handiwork. She had turned all the figures on the streets and sidewalks of Millville's downtown to face the lighted Christmas tree at the center of the green. Though this was peculiar, it certainly did no harm—in fact, it lent the scene a compelling air of anticipation—and Alice left it as it was, hoping it had offered the motherless girl some measure of solace.

DECEMBER 2000

It was a drab winter day, and the canoe was almost complete. It had taken Thibodeau two weeks to complete the planking and ribbing. Now there was only the finishing work and the replacement of the center thwart, which he wasn't happy with. Though he had done it dozens of times, it was always a wonder to Dick that a boat could be constructed out of wood. A lifelong Catholic, he viewed it almost as a form of transubstantiation: the soul of one living thing—a tree—being transformed into the soul of another living thing—a boat. For as far as he was concerned, a boat *was* a living thing, especially when it was on the water. Why, it would take you wherever you wanted to go! He'd once heard a story of a Micmac from New Brunswick who'd decided he wanted to see New York City. He put his canoe into the St. Lawrence, paddled upriver to Montreal, portaged over to Lake Champlain, and then paddled down the lengths of Lake Champlain and Lake George to the Hudson, portaging between bodies of water. He'd arrived a month later at the 79th Street Boat Basin, and, after taking in the sights, got back in his canoe and paddled back to Canada.

The canoe that Dick was building was too small for such an extensive journey, but it was an elegant thing, with the high, curving ends typical of Maine Indian canoes. Like all of Dick's canoes, it was also a lovely color—a soft reddish-orange, it being the inner bark that became the outer surface of the canoe. Now Dick was doing the decorative work: chiseling a vine-leaf pattern into the

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bark rind just under the line of the gunwales.

Bunky Toothaker sat in the rocker by the wood stove, mugging up as usual. Dick's daughter-in-law, Dorrie, was also there, along with his granddaughter, Katie. They had brought out some freshly baked Christmas cookies. They had been baking cookies for the Christmas reception at the library after the caroling on the green, which would be held the next evening. There were cookies in the shape of candy canes, stars, wreaths, reindeer, Santas, and snowmen—all iced and sugared in red, green, and white.

"That daughter-in-law of yours, she sure can bake," said Bunky as he helped himself to another cookie from the plate that rested on the end of the nail barrel that served as a table. Bunky was often the beneficiary of the products of Dorrie's baking expertise during his afternoons in Dick's wood shop.

"Don't forget Katie," said Dick, looking over at her. She sat on the bottom step of the hayloft stairs, just below her mother. They were enjoying a moment of rest after their labors. It was these two—not his son, who'd always been a disappointment to him, nor his wife Shirley, who'd been gone for so many years—who were closest to his heart.

"Yep, she's gettin' to be a pretty good little baker, too," complimented Bunky, with a wink at the chunky little girl.

Katie smiled, but said nothing. In Dick's eyes, her parsimoniousness with words was one of her chief virtues, as it was one of her mother's. Often the three of them would sit in quiet companionship in just this way: the two of them watching Dick at his work. Or it would be just him and Dorrie, she working silently on her knitting or embroidery.

It was another story with his flapjaw friend. But even with Bunky's yakking, the workshop seemed unusually peaceful that afternoon. Especially by comparison with the weather outside: The temperature had dropped and a wind had risen, rattling the loosely fitting casements of the old windows. A storm was predicted for later that evening.

"Who's this one for?" Bunky asked as Dick finished his cookies and returned to carving the vine pattern on the bow of the canoe.

"Don't rightly know," Dick replied.

"You don't have a buyer?" asked Bunky in surprise. Dick's canoes were usually sold long before work on them was even started.

"You know the last canoe I built?" he asked.

"The *Canot du nord,*" interjected Dorrie.

Bunky nodded. He had watched for months as Thibodeau had painstakingly crafted the canoe—of the type once used by French-Canadian fur trappers, or *voyageurs*—for a New York lawyer who was planning to follow in Thoreau's footsteps up the west branch of the Penobscot to Mount Katahdin.

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"I finished it in the morning; the guy came to pick it up that afternoon. I didn't like that." He shook his head. "Didn't like it one bit. No sirree. I don't like to part with 'em. Leastways, not so quick. I like to keep 'em around for a while, try 'em out on the lake." He nodded in the direction of the lake at the rear of the old barn.

"So you're building this one on spec?" Bunky asked. He rose to refill his coffee mug from the pot that was a fixture atop the wood stove.

Dick nodded. "That way I can keep it around awhile." He was as concerned with the fate of his boats as a breeder of thoroughbreds was about the future of his colts. He wanted to raise them right, make sure they went to the right homes. He knew where every one of them was and sometimes even went to visit.

Or they came back to him, arriving at the end of the season with tears and scrapes that he mended with the solicitousness of a parent looking after a child's wounds.

Bunky gave the canoe an appraising look. "Small, ain't it?"

"Yep," Dick replied. "Ten feet. It's a hunter canoe, for one person. It'll only weigh about twenty pounds. The ladies like canoes like this because they can carry 'em themselves." He added: "I'm going to call her the *Penobscot Princess.*" Thibodeau was in the habit of naming the canoes he made.

"After Dorrie here?" asked Bunky.

"Maybe," Dick replied. He looked over fondly at her, this lovely dark-haired woman who had blessed his old age.

"I know!" Katie announced. "You're going to give her to Mom for Christmas!"

It was a good idea, Dick thought. A small canoe for Dorrie alone to use. But it wouldn't be this one. The *Penobscot Princess,* as fitting as its name might be, was destined for another fate. He didn't know what that was yet, but intuition told him it wasn't as a Christmas present.

"Not this time, kitten," he said, using his nickname for Katie, which came as much from her eyes, which were the green of a cat's, as from her name. "Maybe the next one."

He went on: "I have a customer in New Jersey who might be interested—a lady who would use it for duck huntin'. But I'm not gonna call her until I'm good and ready," he added. He patted the flank of the canoe as if it were a horse. Having completed the vine pattern, he stood back to admire his craftsmanship.

He would try it out tomorrow in the Mill Stream inlet, where the lake didn't ice over.

DECEMBER 2001

Katie Thibodeau was waiting at the door of the library the next day when Alice Sanborn arrived to open up. Once again she pulled

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up a stool next to the plywood sheets and carefully arranged her purse on her lap. She had to do this several times before she got it right. Then she studied the Christmas village. After about ten minutes, she removed the purse, stood up, and again started moving the figures around. This time Alice went over to watch. Katie walked the figures, one by one, to the town green, and assembled them in five ranks of ten or twelve in front of the Christmas tree next to the gazebo. Inside the gazebo sat the members of the village band: Harry Miller with his tuba, the Henderson twins with their trombones, and all the rest of them. There was even Al Harvey in his Santa suit on the ladder truck.

"Are they singing carols?" Alice asked, once again hoping to draw Katie out.

As before, Katie failed to reply. Or even to look around. Her round, freckled face stared with preternatural avidity at the assembly in front of the tree. Among the group was Katie's mother, who stood at the center of the second row between Katie and her brother. But Alice's inquiry did provoke a response. Katie started walking each of the figures back to their respective homes, trotting them along the sidewalks with a wriggle of her wrist. The last to arrive home were Dorrie Thibodeau and her children.

Was this wishful thinking, Alice wondered? Was Katie expressing the hope that her mother would be with her for this year's Christmas festivities? Or was she reliving her memory of Christmas a year ago when her mother had still been alive? It was while she was pondering these questions that Alice remembered that Dorrie Thibodeau had disappeared on the evening of the caroling on the green.

It was then that a third possibility occurred to her: that Katie might be reenacting the events leading up to her mother's death, that the girl—stricken mute by grief—might be trying to tell, through the figures, the story that she couldn't say in words.

DECEMBER 2000

Dick Thibodeau heard them quarreling from the kitchen, where he was fixing himself a scrambled egg sandwich. Their voices were carried from the barn on the cold northeast wind: Larry's harsh shouting; Dorrie's soft protests. Larry had spent the evening at the village pub, and he'd been drunk when he arrived home at nine-thirty, just after Dorrie and the kids got back from caroling. Dick couldn't tell what the argument was about, but it didn't matter. Larry would find something to criticize her for. It was probably about the caroling. He didn't like Dorrie going out, even for something as innocent as caroling. He would just as soon have tied a ball and chain around her ankle. Dick had tried to intervene on many occasions, but it was no use. Larry was resistant to intervention when he was drunk, deaf to it while he was sober. They shared so

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much: their love of nature, their love of canoes, their love of working with their hands. But not this—this brutish behavior. Where had it come from? he had often wondered. Had he and Shirley spoiled him because he was an only child? Could it have been in his genes? Shirley's brothers all had drinking problems. Was it Larry's stint as a merchant seaman that had hardened him, instilled the habit of heavy drinking? He was tormented by these questions. The best he could manage was to try to be supportive of Dorrie.

Hearing the slam of a door, he looked out and saw Larry stagger across the yard to his pickup. After the truck had pulled out (probably headed back to the pub), he went out to the barn. He entered with a sense of trepidation, expecting to find Dorrie in tears, as he often had. Instead, the sight that met his eyes horrified him beyond anything he'd ever experienced. Dorrie was dead; his son—his only child—had killed her.

He knew she was dead the moment he laid his eyes on her body. Her eyes were open—those smiling brown eyes. Her long black hair lay in a fan across the floor, except where it was matted with blood. Blood stained the sawdust on the floor. Next to the body lay the bloodied replacement thwart he'd recently finished. Larry had hit her over the head with it. He wondered if Larry even knew he had killed her.

Feeling his stomach lurch, Thibodeau sank to his knees, his back against the doorjamb, tears streaming down his cheeks. His heart felt like a piston pounding against the inside of his chest. And he thought: *Now I know what it means to have a broken heart.* He sat like this for some time with his eyes closed, he didn't know how long, taking solace from the presence of Dorrie's body. Even in death, she comforted him.

Then he silently started reciting the Lord's Prayer. *And now, as our Savior Christ hath taught us, we are bold to say . . .* Once, twice, a dozen times—until he felt his pounding heart gradually still. Then he slowly opened his eyes.

He had to do something; he couldn't let his boy go to jail. He looked at the bloodstained sawdust; it was a half-inch deep in places, the product of some bookshelves he'd built for Dorrie's room just that afternoon. A good thing, too—the blood hadn't stained the floorboards. He could burn the sawdust and no one would be the wiser. But what was he going to do with the body?

It was then that his glance fell on the *Penobscot Princess.* He didn't know how he had known it had a special destiny, but he had. Taking a deep breath, he went over to his workbench and picked up a chisel. Returning to the canoe, he carefully inscribed the initials H. B. C. in the bark rind, just under the name. It was what the fur traders of the Hudson's Bay Company had carved on the bows of their canoes: "Here Before Christ."

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DECEMBER 2001

It was the sixth day that Katie Thibodeau had come to the library and, as before, her ten minutes of contemplation were followed by play with the figures. This time, though, it was only figures representing members of her family that she moved. Like the church and the general store, the Thibodeaus' house was more detailed than the other buildings in the Christmas village. It was the only house accorded this special treatment, by virtue of its belonging to the village's creator. The front door actually opened, and the inside wasn't a hollow shell but divided into upstairs and downstairs rooms. As Alice looked on, Katie arranged the figures in the rooms: herself by a window in a back bedroom; her brother, Ned, asleep in another bedroom; her grandfather standing in a downstairs room at the back. Alice knew from her visits to the house that this room was the kitchen. The girl's mother and father were in the barn, standing next to the canoe on which her grandfather had been working in the original arrangement of the figures.

When she had finished moving the figures around, Katie sat back down.

Though Katie didn't look at her, Alice had the sense that the girl was waiting for her to say something. "Let me guess," she said. "It's after the caroling on the green. You and Ned are going to bed?"

Katie didn't nod, but she might as well have. In response, she reached over and removed the miniature replica of the canoe from the barn. Holding it by one end, she removed the center thwart, which came out easily, being wedged rather than glued between the gunwales. Then she returned the canoe to the barn.

For a moment she sat there, holding the tiny thwart in her chubby fingers. Then she slowly spun around and fixed Alice with her almond-shaped eyes. They were celery green, flecked with hazel, and Alice felt caught in their spell. It was the first time she had known Katie to make eye contact with anyone since her mother's disappearance.

"What happened next?" Alice asked.

Reaching into the open door of the barn, Katie placed the thwart in the hand of the figure representing her father. Then, holding thwart and hand together between her own thumb and forefinger, she reenacted her father hitting her mother over the head repeatedly with the thwart.

Alice sucked in her breath. "I understand," she whispered softly. Slowly, she edged over to the front door, where she swiveled the sign that hung in the window from Open to Closed and turned the bolt in the lock.

The only patron in the library was Roger Spaulding, and he was dozing. His head lolled against the back of the wing chair and the newspaper lay open in his lap. He was snoring. She knew from

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experience that it would be awhile before he woke up. "Go on," she urged, returning to Katie's side. "What happened then?"

As Alice looked on, Katie gently laid the figure of her mother on the floor and set the thwart down beside it. Then she started moving the figures around again. The figure of her father went out to his truck, and the truck moved off down the road. The figure of her grandfather went out to the barn. And the figure representing Katie went down the stairs and out to the barn, where it stood just outside the open door.

DECEMBER 2000

It was a good thing Dick hadn't installed the replacement thwart yet. If he had, he would have had to remove it to get the body in. Although Dorrie was slim, she was tall, and it would have been a job sliding her body in-between the center and quarter thwarts. As it was, he just rolled it up in an old tarp, lifted it gently into the canoe, and inserted the bloodied thwart to hold it in. Katie had been right: The canoe would be a Christmas present for her mother, he thought with bitter irony. Then he loaded the canoe onto the cart that he used to haul firewood. It didn't fit all the way in—the stem protruded over the handles of the cart—but it fit well enough. Once he had secured it with rope, he turned off the lights and pushed the cart through the barn door. It was a beautiful night. Low clouds were massing in the northeast, but the sky overhead was clear, and a full moon hung above the lake. There was still no snow, in spite of the weather report. Which was fine; he would just as soon not leave footprints on the path. The Thibodeau house was only a hundred yards from the inlet, with only old Mrs. Freeley's house and the abandoned mill in-between. He doubted anyone would see him, despite the full moon. Mrs. Freeley would be in bed, and there would be no one else about. Slowly he wheeled the cart across the grass at the rear of the barn and onto the footpath that ran along the shore of the lake.

Arriving at the inlet ten minutes later, he unrolled the body from the tarp—it wasn't a fitting enough raiment—and lovingly rearranged Dorrie's hair. Then, working quickly, he folded her hands over her midsection, kissed her on the cheek, and slid the canoe down the steep embankment. As a result of the current, the inlet was free of ice for a good hundred yards. The stream was swollen with runoff from a heavy rain two days before. Good—that meant it would carry the canoe even farther out into the lake. Leaving the canoe at the foot of the embankment, he went back to the cart for his hand drill, which he fitted with a half-inch auger bit. This was the tricky part: He wanted a hole that was big enough that the canoe would readily sink, but not so big that it would sink before it got well out into the lake. But he had dam-

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aged enough canoes in his day that he had a pretty good idea of the right size. When he had finished drilling a hole in the stern, he pushed the canoe a short distance out into the stream and watched as the water bubbled up through the hole, assessing whether it was the right size. He decided it was.

At last, he gave the canoe a hefty shove into the channel and stood watching as it glided on the current toward the center of the lake. The moon hung overhead, and the canoe followed the watery path of its reflection. The yellow of Dorrie's parka gleamed. *A yellow leaf in Autumn,* Dick thought. It was in just this way that her ancestors had sent the souls of their loved ones on their journey to the Great Spirit.

As he watched, he could see the gunwales sinking. And then the stern started to go under. In a moment, the stern had sunk completely and the stem was upended, the name and the initials H. B. C., "Here Before Christ," readily visible in the moonlight. A moment later, the *Penobscot Princess* had disappeared beneath the shining big-sea water.

The wind was in his face as he headed back, stinging his cheeks and carrying the scent of snow. Six inches were predicted, which would be enough to cover his tracks. And coming at this time of year as it was, it would be spring before it melted.

DECEMBER 2001

Alice was eagerly awaiting Katie's arrival at the library the next day. She had notified the police of Katie's revelation, but they had decided to stay away, reasoning that their appearance might frighten Katie from continuing. For she was at the crucial part of the story: where the body was buried. When Katie Thibodeau arrived at the library on the seventh day, she skipped her purse-and-staring routine. Instead, she came directly to Alice, took her by the hand, and led her over to the village. The first figure she moved was that of her grandfather, which she placed next to the recumbent figure of her mother. Next she used both hands to help him pick up her mother's body and put it into the canoe. Then she replaced the thwart, placed the canoe into the utility cart, and marched the assembly along the shore of the mirrored lake to the inlet of Mill Stream. Here, her grandfather unloaded the canoe and put it in the stream, which was painted onto the plywood surface in shades of navy and midnight blue.

Tears were streaming down little Katie's face as she slowly slid the canoe out onto the surface of the mirrored lake. When she came to the edge of the table, she upended the canoe and gently lowered it beneath the table's surface.

"Your mother's body is in the canoe," Alice said, confirming the

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scene that Katie had just reenacted. "And your grandfather sunk it in the lake?"

Katie looked up at her with her celery-green eyes.

"Yes," she said simply, speaking for the first time in a year. "Yes, that's right."

Divers searched for the canoe after ice-out the following spring, despite Dick Thibodeau's claim that he'd sold it to a woman from New Jersey whose name he couldn't remember. But they never found the canoe, or the body. Like all of Dick's canoes, the *Penobscot Princess* had been built entirely of organic materials—there wasn't a nail or a piece of plastic in it; like a banana peel, it was biodegradable and had probably disintegrated. Larry Thibodeau was never found. Nor did the police ever find Dorrie Thibodeau's skeleton, which was probably buried in the muck at the lake bottom. But nobody doubted Katie's story. For one thing, it was inconceivable that Dick Thibodeau would ever have forgotten the name of a woman who had bought one of his canoes.

Little Katie gave up her plastic purse after that. She resumed talking, too, but she never said a word about the events of the evening of the caroling on the green. ●

"It's a mystery to me why you like murder mysteries."

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A Real Crime

by Carmen Iarrera

It was Christmas Day and as the youngest officer and, what's more, the only bachelor, I was on duty. An old tradition in the police. And fair enough. No problem. Except I still felt pretty bleak about it.

I had a family, too, far away in another town, and to be honest I would have much preferred to be there with them, sitting around the table with all the trimmings, eating my mother's special crispy flan and homemade sauce, telling jokes and enjoying the whoops of delight when my sisters' children caught sight of the pile of presents.

Instead, here I was in the empty office of an empty police station, reading a newspaper devoid of any interest, from cover to cover, while from far away downstairs trickled the tinny sound of the guard's transistor radio. The other sacrificial bachelor.

I was just thinking how long and dreary the day was going to be when the telephone rang, echoing in the silent office.

"Hello," I answered, beating the guard downstairs to it. "Police."

On the other end of the line, the man's voice was panting, breathless. "I was out jogging," said the man, struggling vainly to get his breath back, "when I saw a man climbing out of a first-floor window. I thought it was a thief, so I ran after him and grabbed him. I'm holding him here now by the scruff of the neck."

"Where are you?" I asked, suddenly awake.

"Here in the phone box," and he gave the address. It was just around the corner and not even worth going to get the car.

I slipped on my coat, torn between feeling secretly grateful to the petty thief for rescuing me from my Christmas blues and half-guilty for my reaction.

Outside, the air was bitter and the roads deserted. From behind

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the festive windows you could see the occasional smiling face, a couple of children pressing their noses up against the glass, the quick movements of women working in the kitchen. Everyone seemed happy. Except for me.

And except for the trembling, frightened boy that the man who had called was literally holding prisoner in the phone box.

"If you ask me, he's on drugs," the man pronounced in a tone of contempt.

I kept quiet. The man was strong, athletically built, and bursting with obvious good health. He was certainly a model citizen. But I've never had much time for people who look down on others. Especially a pitiful specimen like the trembling boy in the phone box.

I made him step outside. He was definitely high on something. He wouldn't have dilated, staring pupils like that just from fear.

"It wasn't me," he stammered, "it wasn't me."

The man sneered openly. "It wasn't you who did what?" he asked.

The boy stared at me blankly and began to shake uncontrollably. "It wasn't me," he shouted wildly. And passed out.

We took him along to the police station, where I handed him over to the guard. Then the man told me from which window and from which building he had seen the boy make his escape, gave me his details and address, and left. It was Christmas, after all, even for him.

I wasn't able to get anything more out of the boy who, by now more or less recovered, was rambling deliriously. I decided to go and see exactly what he had been up to in that house.

The concierge came to open the door, removing a napkin from around his neck. I told him what I knew, asking him to show me the first-floor window fitting the description, and apologized for interrupting his lunch.

"Poor old girl," he said. "She must have fainted with fright, otherwise she'd have run out screaming. . . ." And he kept his finger on the doorbell for a long time, just in case.

"But are you sure she's in?" I queried.

"Well, I haven't seen her go out. And anyway, she never goes out. Not even to take the dog. You know what it's like when you're old, and there's the garden . . ."

"She's not answering. . . ."

The concierge looked at me, suddenly concerned. "I've got a spare set of keys at home," he said. "I'll go and get them."

I followed him down the stairs but stayed on the threshold. From inside wafted a strong smell of ragout and the sound of lively voices drowning out the sound of the television.

We went back to the ground floor and opened the door. "Ms. Teresa," called out the concierge. "Ms. Teresa, it's me, Gustave."

We found her in the bedroom, sitting in the armchair with the

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dog at her feet. A hole between her staring eyes. The dog had an identical hole in the head. On the floor nearby was a handgun.

I sent the shocked concierge back to his Christmas lunch, now irrevocably ruined, and called in forensics, the coroner, and the judge. While waiting, I walked around the house. It was small, only two rooms, and very modestly furnished. But except for the open drawers, it was tidy, clean, and the few pieces of furniture were fine-looking antiques. Even the large painting hanging over the sofa showing a beautiful marina had to be quite valuable.

Everything in that house reeked of old money. Money long since spent. I continued my tour. A freezing draft of air came through the kitchen window, which was open. That had to be where the lock had been forced. Under the window, outside in the garden, was a package. I climbed over the sill. In the package, I found a bundle of cash, an assortment of mismatched silver cutlery, an old gold pocket watch, and an antique silver frame. From inside the frame, the image of a proud-looking officer in full dress uniform gazed back at me, the photograph now faded to a sepia tone.

The judge arrived, with the concierge. After he'd looked around and confirmed the point of entry and the death of the old lady and the dog, he authorized me to carry on, and then hurriedly returned home to his children. Both studying law, he told me proudly.

Then the coroner and the forensics officer arrived, neither bothering to hide their annoyance at this unexpected bit of overtime.

I resigned myself to the worst part of my job. "Did the old lady have any family that you know of?" I asked the concierge. "I'll have to go and see them."

He pulled a face. "Great family they were. Ms. Teresa moved here on purpose to be nearer to them and they—" he shook his head in disgust—"they never used to come and see her, you know. Even though they live right next door, three buildings down the road. She was always the one who went to see them, always with a little present of some kind. She used to give them the best things she had. A vase here, an old ornament there. She emptied her house for them and they . . . well, the least they could have done was invite her over for Christmas, don't you think? At least then she wouldn't have been killed."

"Perhaps they did invite her," I countered.

"Oh yes?" said the concierge. "Then why didn't she go? Do you think she really preferred staying here alone with her dog? Come off it, Officer. . . ." And away he went, still shaking his head as if I was just too young to understand.

I went back to the station. Now time for some cross-examination. The standard procedure. "Why did you kill her?" I asked the boy.

"It wasn't me," he moaned.

"Drink this," I said, forcing a cup of coffee into his hands. "Calm

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down and think. Lying won't get you anywhere. You forced that window thinking there was no one at home. You took a couple of things from the sitting room and then you went into the bedroom. The old lady walked in on you, probably started screaming, and so you shot her. And then you shot the dog to stop it from barking. Or was it the other way round? Either way, you panicked and quickly got out through the window you had come in by. You were so scared by what you had done that you even left the goods behind, right?"

He began to shake again. Shaking so much that the coffee spilt onto his crumpled jeans. He didn't even notice. "It wasn't me," he repeated. "I only wanted . . . to steal something . . . a bit of cash . . ."

"For drugs, right?"

The boy lowered his head.

"But then she surprised you and you killed her," I insisted.

"No!" he shouted. "No!"

"At least tell me where you got the gun."

"It wasn't me." He began to sob. "It wasn't me."

He was shaking far too much. Not just because he was frightened, that much was obvious, but because he was fast going into withdrawal. Five years on the anti-drug squad had taught me something. To carry on questioning him now would be pointless. I put a blanket round him and left him with the guard. Forensics would soon be here, and the results of the fingerprint tests would be worth more than any confession.

What a Christmas . . .

The house where Ms. Teresa's relations lived was rich and welcoming. A maid came to meet me at the door. They were all in the sitting room around the fireplace. All busy opening mountains of presents with exclamations of pleasure and throwing the ribbons and wrapping paper into the fire.

The news I brought met with a strange embarrassment.

"Poor Aunt Teresa," murmured the master of the house, subdued. "To end up like that. If she had been here today, it wouldn't have happened."

His wife pursed her thin lips together disapprovingly. She was a thin woman, weighed down with jewels, unattractive. "It's just so typical of your aunt to ruin the party," she said.

"But darling," he protested feebly. "My aunt has been—"

"Your aunt," she interrupted him sourly, "was a stubborn, selfish old lady."

"That's not true." A little girl jumped up. She was the smallest of the children sitting down unwrapping presents. Her dress, like a Victorian doll's, was in sharp contrast with the determined spark in her eyes. "Aunty Teresa was good. Very good!"

"Only because she stuffed you full of sweets," her mother

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answered back. "So that now I've got to take you to the dentist."

"I don't think it's quite the right moment," the brother of the owner of the house tried to intervene, while his wife toyed nervously with her bangles and the other children, wide-eyed, followed the heated exchange.

"Aunty Teresa was good!" the little girl shouted again. "She gave lots of things to you, too."

"Oh yes, lots, two strings of pearls," muttered the mother to herself.

"And those rings there." She pointed to them.

The mother instinctively hid her hands in her lap. "Stop it!"

"But you didn't want her to bring poor old Tommy!" the little girl carried on shouting, her eyes brimming with tears. "I heard you, you know, when you were arguing with Daddy. You said: 'If she doesn't want to leave the dog it's fine with me, that means she won't come at all!'"

The father thought it wise to interrupt. "Keep quiet, Clara, please. You see," he continued, turning towards me, "my aunt was very attached to Tommy—"

"That old mongrel," hissed his wife.

"—and she never wanted to leave him behind," the husband carried on uncomfortably. "But my wife has a strong sense of hygiene and—and what with having children around and—"

"You don't need to explain," I stopped him. "I only came to tell you what has happened. I should be on my way."

While the maid was walking me to the door I heard the lady of the house saying that at long last she would be able to hang that beautiful picture of the marina over the fireplace, while the nineteenth-century chest of drawers . . .

Outside at last, I stood and took in deep breaths of the freezing air. There were worse things in life than a drug addict killing out of fear.

But the boy had not killed anyone. He was innocent. The results of the fingerprint test, analyzed with amazing speed, placed him completely in the clear. The same tests, this time run on Ms. Teresa, showed that she had killed the dog and then killed herself. With one bullet between the eyes from her husband's old handgun.

The boy had not been lying. Breaking in to steal, he had stumbled upon a horrific scene and had run off completely petrified.

Later on that evening, I drew up the police report. I found it hard to write the word suicide.

Poor old Ms. Teresa, simply looking for some affection, had instead found herself surrounded by greed and contempt and people who had completely abandoned her.

Even on Christmas Day.

And so she had preferred to die. Along with her dog, the only living creature who really loved her.

Now that is what I call a real crime. ●

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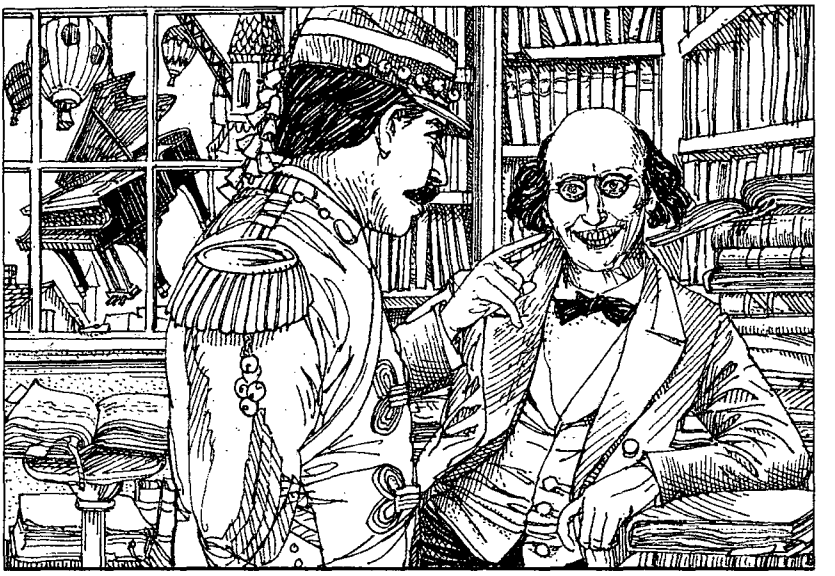

Art by Allen Davis

THE ZOROASTER GRIN

by James Powell

The first week of August, 1925, brought rumors that Ambrose Ganelon III, who had recently taken over San Sebastiano's famous detective agency, was going to be murdered. Ganelon maintained his trademark lopsided grin in public, concerned only that his father, now semiretired and away on a private investigation, would hear the story and return to be of help.

Somewhat shorter than his scientific father, Ganelon was broader in the shoulders. Six years in the trenches and a few more going toe-to-toe with the principality's underworld had given him a battered-about face and a scrappy, two-fisted reputation.

Talk of his impending murder persisted into the second week amid rejoicing in the streets, for San Sebastiano was celebrating Reiteration Days, its merry commemoration of the Battle of the Tortue in 1625, when Prince Leonard, the Laughing Cavalier, defeated Captain-General Martin Corbeau and his Puritan pikemen to restore the House of Tancredi to the throne.

Since every skeleton in the Tancredi closet had a couple of spare funny bones, the festivities emphasized organized hilarity and

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hi-jinks as well as street dances, costume balls, and nightly fireworks. It would all conclude in two days' time with the Shaggy Dog Awards, given for the funniest story written to a punchline announced the year before.

Tradition excused the Ganelons from these events. Custom called for those around the prince to wear the cap and bells. And no one had been brave enough to suggest that Ganelon's terror of a grandfather wear such headgear.

Late one afternoon, as the detective sat brooding over the agency books, Madam Hortense Gadebois, their secretary-receptionist, knocked and paused, as if to give any murderer time to escape by the window, before pushing her large jaw through the office door. "London on the line," she announced. "It's the Sweeney." Madam Gadebois took her vacations in London, where Cockney rhyming slang paired the CID's famous Flying Squad with Sweeney Todd.

Most of James Powell's brilliantly fanciful stories contain interesting elements of fact. Here's one he mentions from this new story: "Painting lead pencils yellow and giving them Oriental names like Mogul dates back to WWI, when the German graphite deposits were no longer available to the Allies and they turned to Chinese graphite, the manufacturers announcing with name and color that these were not German goods." ¶

This particular Sweeney was Inspector Haverstick, who had served with Ganelon during the War. The Englishman sounded relieved to hear his voice, for the rumors had reached London, too, and newspapers were updating Ganelon's obituary. "By the bye, I just gave your prefecture a jingle regarding some strange goings-on at this end. The owners of small translating services have been dropping like flies. No sign of foul play. But from Frau Gruber to Signor Pecci, the corpses wore the same grimace of horror, a ghastly ear-to-ear grin. You'll never guess what our medical brass hats think we've got," he added confidently.

"Ho-Ho fever," guessed Ganelon.

Haverstick was amazed. "Right on the bloody noggin. But don't hang up. There's more. We found the name 'Dr. Underhill' in a victim's appointment book. Our only one of those is an Old Persian scholar at the British Museum." Ganelon tightened his grip on the neck of the telephone.

"Anyway, we entered his apartment with a warrant, to be greeted by another grinning corpse, one Dr. John Bolton, a colleague of Underhill's. Dead for several days, just about the time his wife reported him missing. No sign of Underhill anywhere.

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Then, three days ago, he was spotted at Croydon aerodrome boarding a Paris-Lyons-Marseilles-San Sebastiano flight. Heading your way. Thought I should fill you people in. We need a little chat with Underhill. Well, keep the old head down."

Hanging up the telephone, Ganelon sat rubbing the small triangular indentation on his left temple. Old Persian and hideous smiles brought to mind Clyde Mustapha, the man who had given him that scar.

Thief, archaeologist, fluent in ancient languages, Mustapha seemed born to break into the dusty strongbox of time and rummage there at will. He had come to San Sebastiano to steal the priceless toadstone amulet which St. Magnus had taken from the corpse of the Great Worm of the Cloaca Maxima, the dragon whose lair the Romans had disturbed when digging San Sebastiano's sewers. The amulet, which today hangs above the saint's tomb in the Abbey of the Holy Vernicle, is reputed to make the wearer as transparent as the great polar ice worms are. How Mustapha stole the amulet and Ganelon recovered it are set down in *Ganelon and the See-Thru Thief* by one of Austin Marchpane's stable of authors who later found more success in food packaging.

There were certain people whose movements Ganelon followed with interest, feeling better when he knew a continent or two separated them. Mustapha was one of these. So last month, when he heard of the man's death at an archaeological dig near Qum, he requested details from the Persian gendarmerie.

Ganelon located their reply in Mustapha's file and read it again. "Honored sir," they wrote, "the circumstances of Mr. Clyde Mustapha's death follow. If we are to believe Osman, the labor foreman at the dig, Mr. Mustapha had just uncovered an electrum tablet inscribed, as ancient riddles are, with much writing on the front and a short answer on the back. Before he could examine it closely, a foreign visitor arrived, a man with a limp who seemed to be a partner in the expedition. The two men withdrew with the tablet into Mr. Mustapha's tent. Soon after, Osman heard a roar of laughter and Mr. Mustapha staggered outside, red-faced with hilarity, and fell dead, a terrible grin on his face. When the workers at the dig saw it, they threw down their tools and fled, shouting about the Mark of Zoroaster, a silly local superstition that need not concern civilized men such as ourselves.

"Our Captain Aslan visited the site, where he found the body, as described, but both the visitor and the tablet had vanished. Without a sign of foul play, our investigation could go no further. Death is attributed to acute Ho-Ho fever, a disease named after the Chinese twins who invented the abacus and are said to have died laughing with delight at their discovery. This affliction is rare here, but not unknown.

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"Our humble greetings to your illustrious father. The memory of his visit amongst us so long ago remains golden, and our astonishment at his solution to the disappearance of the great turquoise called the Peacock's Footstool continues unabated. . . ."

Ganelon closed the file and returned to the agency books. But they put him in so bad a humor that after dinner he decided to visit the Cellars, low drinking haunts where, he understood, the furtive gentry were already celebrating his demise.

He left 18 bis rue Blondin on foot. His father had taken the roadster, leaving nothing but the old robin's-egg-blue electric Voltiger laudauette whose operation only Achmed, their Berber chauffeur, knew. Bedridden up in the attic now, old Achmed slept his days away unless his dreams drove him out along a dangerous run of the coastal highway when he might suddenly sit bolt upright, eyes feverish, and seek the steering lever with a withered hand.

At the end of the street Ganelon noticed a woman with bobbed blond hair sitting in a parked sedan. She was working in a crossword-puzzle book with a yellow pencil by evening light. When the woman raised her pretty head, something about her made him wary. Or was it the fact that she ignored him, looking down the street the way he'd come? Smiling at his own conceit, Ganelon walked on until he reached the Cellars, a resort for San Sebastiano nightlife since the time of Captain-General Martin Corbeau.

After driving the effete Prince Florisant and his extravagant court into exile, the Captain-General had ruled the principality with a heavy hand in a very solemn glove. Buckles were banned from shoes and hats, to laugh in public was a felony called "incitement to frivolity," and no one was allowed on the street after compulsory evening prayers.

So nightlife fled underground to a mazy, interconnected world of cellars, passageways, and elaborate tunnelings from which the principality once quarried stone and dug the clay to build itself. Meanwhile, overhead, the night watch patrolled, long-necked cobble-horns in their ears, skimming along the street listening for underground blaspheming or slap of playing cards.

For his first stop Ganelon chose an unsavory den called Au Tombeau du Chasseur, which took its name from the mural behind the bar, the ever-popular Hunter's Funeral theme: the sportsman's coffin on the tumbrel followed by a wolf in priest's stole and other denizens of field and forest smirking behind their mourning while a crocodile sold bottles of his own tears from a tray.

But a careful eye will notice the acolyte rabbits taking up the rear carrying an armchair with an oboe on it. Yes, this is the funeral of Ganelon's grandfather, founder of the detective agency.

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Notice the wolf-priest's resemblance to the deceased's archenemy, the evil genius Dr. Ludwig Fong. See how the animals in the cortege carry the tools of the petty criminals' trade, from burglar's jimmy to coin-parer's knife. Note the ace peeking from the sharper's sleeve, or how the wild boar in stovepipe hat hung about with crepe winks out at you as he picks his neighbor's pocket. There behind the crocodile is the bucket from which he fills his fraudulent bottles.

Ganelon was halfway down the flight of stairs from the street when the noisy room below him fell still. He got a drink at the bar and chose a table where he could watch the faces of the new arrivals fall as they caught sight of him. In truth, none here would ever rise high enough in crime to merit his family's attention. Take Buvis there. The big man scowling down into his drink through thick lenses had started out collecting debts for the bookies. Once, with youthful enthusiasm, he had had his neck tattooed with a dotted line and instructions to the guillotine operator: "Cut here!" Today, gone to fat and chartered accountancy, Buvis cooked the books for criminal enterprises and wore turtlenecks to hide the tattoo.

Then, as if to contradict Ganelon's very thoughts, old Piccolo came limping down the steps leaning on his thin Malacca cane. A hired assassin, master of the dart-gun until gouty feet forced his retirement, Piccolo had avoided locking horns with the Ganelons by working abroad. When the old man saw him, he grinned broadly before vanishing into a smoky corner. Ganelon wondered what had brought him out on bad feet.

Piccolo's grin reminded him of the Mark of Zoroaster. After the letter from the Persian gendarmerie, he had tried to look it up in the one-volume office encyclopedia. He learned that the Persian seer Zoroaster was the only human born laughing, that he was a popularizer of the ideas of the Greek Pre-Socratic philosophers in his corner of the world, that he had some mysterious power over the surrounding kings and ruled them much as great Solomon ruled the djin. But he drew a blank on the Mark of Zoroaster. Well, whatever it was, it had spread to London.

By his next drink, Ganelon found himself thinking once more about Blanche Gautier, the beautiful young woman, with a face like the moon in a sky of black hair, who now rented the spare second-floor room at 18 bis, which she used for her modest palm reading and Tarot consultations business. She was studying for her spiritualist's license while supporting herself by leading and playing tambourine in the Palace All-Girl Orchestra.

He had taken Blanche out several times, most recently to a matinee to see *A King in Exile,* the latest bittersweet adventure of Auguste, the sad-faced star of the Czechoslovak silent screen

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whom everyone called "Auguste Elephant" because of his protruding ears. Later they walked in the Parc de la Menagerie, the topiary garden on the site of the royal stable of rare animals, discussing the film and arguing about the symbolism of the one-legged hurdy-gurdy player who appeared at critical points in the story. Blanche had a mind of her own, expressing herself with flashes of spirit which hinted at a formidable temper.

Newspapers had tried to link Ganelon romantically with Ludwig Fong's Irish granddaughter, Lady Emerald Fong. But the women he met professionally weren't the kind you'd start a family with. Blanche was something again. And it wasn't just the advantage for a man in his line of work to be married to a woman with second sight. She made him think about the future.

Thanks to Ganelon's father and grandfather, criminals of genius were avoiding San Sebastiano. To survive, the agency would have to expand abroad. Ganelon saw it sending operatives all around the world. Ganelon men, people would call them. G-men for short. He saw them wearing some distinctive piece of apparel, he hadn't decided what. The rough-and-tumble aspect of the business seemed to exclude crested blazers, while cub newspaper reporters had already preempted the porkpie hat.

Trenchcoats sounded promising enough for him to visit an army-surplus warehouse. But in the last months of the War manufacturers had added belts, loops, and buckles, as if such things alone could bring victory. Seeing them hanging there on racks, Ganelon thought they looked more like empty straitjackets than detective-wear.

A short cry of pain and dry gasping interrupted his thoughts. Piccolo hopped out of the gloom on one leg, a hand clutching a gouty foot, the other clawing at his wheezy throat. Then the old man pitched forward onto the linoleum to begin the long writhing crawl toward death which characterized the slow poisons into which he dipped his darts.

Ganelon watched helplessly as the master assassin died. Had Lady Emerald Fong hired Piccolo to kill him? Had he finally convinced her his intrusions into her affairs reflected no romantic interest on his part, only a determination she should never regain control of the San Sebastiano waterfront? Or was her jealous brother Sean Fong, he of the red pompadour, behind the attack?

The Irish Fongs got their San Sebastiano foothold while Ganelon was away in the trenches and his father was concocting mind games for Allied intelligence to use against the Central Powers. The struggle to drive them out had been long and hard. And in the end they had gone no farther than the S.S. Mrs. Henry W. Nesbit, an old Great Lakes collier converted by the Fongs into an off-

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shore gambling boat and whippet dog-track just beyond the three-mile limit.

And if it was the Fongs, what had saved him? Had someone accidentally stepped on Piccolo's foot, making him inhale the dart himself? Or had it been deliberate? Did Ganelon have a friend in this place? After a long look around the room he finished his drink. It was, he decided, time to go put a damper on the festivities at another cellar, perhaps the Élysée des Rats.

By the time Ganelon returned to the moonlit rue Blondin, the city lay in official darkness. Each day's festivities closed with a blackout to commemorate Petitpas's Manifesto.

During the Captain-Generalcy, the students of the École Normale Pantomimique marched to Sunday services in a solemn body and listened to the sermons so attentively that Corbeau decided they were giving sanctimoniousness a bad name and suppressed the school. Among the students cast out to starve, mimes without diplomas, was young Petitpas who, one gray market day as shoppers and merchants haggled half-heartedly over wilted bunches of gray turnips, leaped up onto a vendor's barrow and mimed a message, urging everyone to march against the stiff wind of tyranny, shatter the shrinking glass box of oppression, and pull together on the rope of common purpose—here he smiled and twirled elegant invisible moustaches—by rallying to the Laughing Cavalier.

Pikemen seized Petitpas and threw him into the deepest dungeon of the Château Gai prison where he met death, legend said, valiantly miming wind, glass box, rope, and moustaches in the utter darkness.

As Ganelon crossed the rue de Pau, a narrow pitch-black alley, he thought he heard hobnailed boots on cobblestones. Some said the ghosts of Corbeau's pikemen were walking abroad again. He stopped to cock an ear. The darkness seemed to cock an ear back at him. After a moment he moved on.

Half a block from home he stopped again. The bruiting about of his murder had made him cautious. On the opposite curb stood a man in smoked glasses with a cane which shone white in the moonlight. The figure was hunched up in a dark overcoat with a turned-up collar and a slouch hat pulled down to meet it. He seemed to lurk. If a blind man could lurk. If the man was blind.

The detective watched him slash his cane around on all sides as if making sure he was alone. Only then did he pull cotton wool from one ear and lean into the street, listening to hear if it was safe to cross. Cramming the cotton wool back in place, the man stepped off the curb.

A car engine roared to life. Ganelon had forgotten the blonde with the bobbed hair. The dark sedan rocketed past him with the

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woman at the wheel. The man in the street never heard it coming. The sedan hit him squarely and tossed him up onto the sidewalk at Ganelon's door. As the detective sprinted toward the fallen man he saw the car's registration number in the moonlight when it sped off around the corner. He reached the body, kneeled down, and found no pulse. The dead man's smoked glasses had been lost in the impact. His eyes were taped over with moleskin.

According to his passport, the man was Everest Underhill. He had arrived by air two days before. In the passport was a slip of paper with Ganelon's address.

When the coroner's wagon and the police had left, Ganelon went upstairs to the family living quarters. He undressed and sat on the edge of the bed and smoked a cigarette. He didn't know why Haverstick's Underhill had been coming to see him decked out like he'd been, or why the blonde in the sedan had killed him. Tomorrow, he swore to himself, he would find out.

As his head hit the pillow, the first boom of the nightly display of fireworks sounded from the barge beyond the harbor. Ganelon fell asleep amid this man-made thunder and dreamed he lay, uniform caked with mud, on the sloping side of a shell hole, his arm around a length of pipe protruding from the mud. He remembered being separated from his raiding party and tumbling into the hole in the dark. Exhausted with trying to get out, he dreamed, he'd fallen asleep at last with the pipe tucked in his armpit.

Stiff and cold, he was awakened by a subterranean *tap-tap-tap* and thought German sappers were tunneling over to his lines. But when he put an ear to the pipe the tapping became the beat of a small orchestra. The music stopped. After a smatter of applause came laughter. Then a man who sounded like he wore a funny hat said, "Two Greek shepherds walking along the road. The fat one says to the thin one, 'Hey, Anaxamander, did you hear about Thales?' 'Why, no, Anaximenes, what's Thales done now?' Anaximenes says, 'He was out stumbling around in the dark looking at the stars when he fell into a well. So some wiseacre says, "If Thales had been looking in the well he might've seen the stars but looking at the stars he didn't see the well."'"

Here Ganelon awoke abruptly into morning sunshine. When his feet hit the floor he smiled and shook his head. His war dreams were less frequent now and leavened with other things. That Thales story, for example, had arrived anonymously a few days before in a letter with a London postmark.

Suddenly he remembered Underhill and his smile vanished.

Later, heading down to the office, he smelled Blanche's delicious coffee. Under other circumstances, he would have stopped. She was always happy when he did. But he had Underhill's murder to

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look into. As he started past her door it opened. She seemed to know it was pointless to invite him in. She smiled and warned him, "If you go to the Café Americain today, avoid the *soupe du jour.*"

"Why?" he wondered.

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"Anyway, your long-distance powers are improving. The cafe's a good six blocks away."

"Seven if it's an inch," she insisted, adding, "No news of your father?" When he shook his head she closed the door.

Ganelon continued down the staircase, wondering if he'd had something to do with his father's trip. To prepare him for a future announcement about his marital intentions, Ganelon had mentioned taking Blanche to the moving pictures to see Czechoslovak star Auguste Elephant. He had forgotten that prominent ears were a mark of the Tancredis. The next day his father left for Prague.

In the 1850s Beaumont-Zoltan, San Sebastiano's Prince Royal, was already exhibiting clown tendencies, painting his face white and appearing at functions with immense shoes poking out from under his ermine robes. In those days Europe gave its princes double-barreled nicknames like Tum-Tum, Plon-Plon, and Fi-Fi, the Prussian one. So Beaumont-Zoltan became Bo-Zo, who, at his majority, renounced the throne in favor of his younger brother and ran off to join the Cirque de la Lune, accompanied by his loyal guardian General Gaston, who mastered the silver cornet so he could play in the circus band.

Until World War I, whenever the circus appeared locally the Tancredis attended incognito, proving, perhaps, that what circus people say is true. Time spent wearing the red nose is not subtracted from one's span of years.

But wars hate circuses. The 1914 one drafted bareback riders into the cavalry, sent their dapple grays to drag artillery pieces through the mud, and marched the clowns off into the various general staffs. Somehow the Cirque de la Lune survived intact before vanishing on the Eastern Front. Some say Bo-Zo lost his memory and his bright red nose amid the horror of the Pripet Marshes. Others claim he had been sighted in Vladivostok with the Czech Legion in 1918. Ganelon's father had pledged to investigate every lead until he found the lost prince, dead or alive.

When Ganelon reached his office, he telephoned the prefecture. The inspector investigating Underhill's murder told him they had traced the sedan to a car-rental agency on the Quai des Matelots. A young Englishwoman named Felicity Bolton had rented it. She was, the policeman reminded him, the wife of the same man

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London thought Underhill had murdered. Near dawn a fishing boat returning from a night's work had found Mrs. Bolton's body floating near the harbor entrance. She had been strangled with the strap of her shoulder bag.

At the car-rental agency the dead woman had given her address as the Hotel Sebastopol. But in fact neither she nor Underhill were registered at any hotel in the principality, all of which were booked up weeks ahead during festival time.

Hanging up the telephone, Ganelon decided to visit Emile Lang, the principality's own Old Persian scholar. Strange outfit or not, Underhill hadn't looked like he'd been living on the street for two days. Perhaps he'd been staying with a colleague.

Coming out onto the street, the detective discovered someone had carved a large intertwined "VR" on his front door with a heavy, pointed object.

When a cannon ball took off the Captain-General's head at the Battle of the Tortue, his pikemen had thrown down their arms and disappeared back into the city. Among the crowds who welcomed the Laughing Cavalier the next day were some who brought more effort than conviction to their cheering.

Through the years the pikemen's descendants had added a grumpy, if silent, ballast to the carefree city. But when England's Queen Victoria made her pronouncement that she was not amused, they began secretly writing "VR" in letters large and small everywhere to announce that they were not amused, either.

Ganelon set out for the Academy, where Lang had his office. When the clown stilt race blocked his way he detoured by the Café Americain, whose outside menu announced "alphabet" to be the *soupe du jour,* whatever that was. It hardly sounded menacing. Now he doubled back to the crowded Boulevard Tancredi, where entire blocks were given over to humorous cartoon work in bright chalk by pavement artists from around the world.

He was halfway up the Academy steps when he noticed a piano-movers' truck pull up to the curb. Blanche and the Palace All-Girl Orchestra regularly performed at the Shaggy Dog Awards. The prince liked to warm up the audience with a few jokes of his own and used rim shots and a healthy shake of tambourine to signal for laughter. Was the truck delivering their piano? Then why, he wondered, had it been following him since he left the rue Blondin?

As Ganelon walked into the Academy, one of the uniformed concierges, a portly man with large flat cheeks, stopped him to ask who he wished to see and then fell in step with him as his escort. "Seeing it was you, sir, I thought you'd come about last night's odd little break-in," he said. "Turns out nothing was taken. Unless you count the burglar making himself a cup of the Director's tea. May I show you something and ask your professional opinion?"

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When Ganelon nodded, the concierge ushered him into a small staff common room. "Now the police say the burglar got in through that window over there. They say someone left it unlocked. And I admit I do open it on my break. I must, you see. We don't allow smoking in the building." The concierge demonstrated by putting his head and shoulders out the window and lighting a cigarette. After a puff he pulled himself back inside, keeping his hand with the cigarette out in the fresh air. "But I'm always careful to lock the window when I'm done. So how could someone use it to break in? Does that lock look forced to you?"

It did not. "Perhaps someone used it to break out," said the detective. Then he left the concierge to finish his cigarette and took the stairs to the third floor. The door to Lang's office stood open. The room seemed burrowed out of a great pile of books and scholarly journals.

Ganelon knocked on the doorjamb. Lang peered around the side of a heaped desk like an RFC pilot trying to navigate his large-engined Sopwith Gnu, the devil-may-care tilt of his horn-rimmed glasses adding to the effect. Then Lang stepped into full view, a brisk little man who swept two chairs clear of papers, took one, pointed Ganelon to the other, and asked, "How's Underhill?"

"Dead."

Lang's eyes swelled with surprise. "The Mark of Zoroaster?" he asked, making his face into a terrible grin.

Ganelon shook his head. "Hit by a car." He described Underhill's death, adding, "Didn't you see the papers?"

"Newspapers, those kindergartens of callow words squirming and mewling about on the page? Never read them. I prefer my language dead as a doornail."

"Can you fill me in on this Mark of Zoroaster business?"

Lang pulled his chair closer. "They say Zoroaster came up with a joke so funny that if you heard it you'd die laughing. And with this terrible rictus on your face, this immense grin. The Mark of Zoroaster. Zoroaster used his fatal joke to kill Ghilghulnebber, King of Mesopotamia, and after that got pretty much his own way in that neck of the woods. Legend has it that just before he died he wrote his joke down somewhere."

Lang raised a finger. "Let's move forward a couple of thousand years. Enter Theo Gideon, a dealer in antiquities and backer of shady archaeological excavations. Ten days ago Gideon offered Underhill a substantial sum to translate a rubbing from an Old Persian tablet."

"Zoroaster's joke?"

Lang shook his head. "A mildly humorous story about two shepherds. That's as much as Underhill would tell me."

Ganelon cocked an eyebrow.

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"Here's the funny part," continued Lang. "Gideon came by for the translation with John Bolton in tow. Bolton's another Old Persian man. Gideon said he wanted a second opinion, which was all right with Underhill, though he found it a bit odd because he'd heard Gideon, who is something of a ladies' man, was involved with Bolton's wife. Anyway, Gideon asked Underhill to read his translation aloud. When he did, Bolton burst out laughing and literally laughed himself to death, Mark of Zoroaster and all."

Ganelon interrupted him. "Let me see if I've got this straight. Underhill translates this joke and nothing happens to him. But when he reads it out loud, Bolton dies and Gideon doesn't."

"Right," said Lang. "And there's more. The next thing Underhill knew, he was being taken to Bolton's house at gunpoint. Gideon and Mrs. Bolton locked him in a small bedroom. But he overheard parts of their plans. Gideon had things to do in London. Then he'd come here and kill you. On his return they'd kill Underhill, staging it to look like Mrs. Bolton had shot an intruder. After that, somehow or other, they'd be living on easy street.

"Underhill was finally able to escape out a water-closet window. He hid in London for a day or two before deciding to fly here to warn you. But stepping off the plane, he spotted Gideon and Mrs. Bolton waiting at the gate. Underhill managed to slip out another way. But he was too afraid to go to your place. Terrified. Wouldn't tell me why. Said it was better I didn't know. He holed up with me in a terrible state of nerves."

While Lang spoke, Ganelon was watching a grand piano being hoisted up past the office window behind the man's shoulder. A Canadian instrument, though whether a Heintzman or a Sherlock-Manning, he would need a better look at the underbelly before he could say.

"Of course, I advised Underhill to phone you," Lang continued. "But he said a wild story's better told face-to-face. Yesterday I got back here around dinnertime. He'd hopped it. Painted one of my canes white and fled over the rooftops."

The Old Persian scholar sat back in his chair. "Well, there you are. Now you know as much as I do. No, hold on. I'm lying. I didn't tell you that Gideon paid me a visit. Here. Late yesterday afternoon."

"What about?"

"Asked me to give Underhill a message. Come to think of it . . ." Lang slapped his jacket pockets, pulled out an envelope, and passed it to the detective.

Inside, Ganelon found a blank sheet of paper. He shrugged and added the sheet to the pile on Lang's desk and got to his feet. "You say this Theo Gideon's here in town. What's he look like?"

"Ordinary garden-variety sort. Never knew what women saw in him." Then Lang brightened and added, "Limpish. Got a bad break

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once jumping out a bedroom window when some husband arrived back unexpectedly."

Ganelon left Lang's office and started down the staircase. Things were getting clearer. Gideon had been the other man in Mustapha's tent at Qum. And the tablet Mustapha found that day hadn't been a riddle. It had been Zoroaster's joke with the punchline on the back. Gideon watched Mustapha read the front of the tablet without cracking a smile. Then he saw him turn the tablet over, read the end of the story, and die laughing, his fatal grin proof positive that Mustapha had found Zoroaster's deadly jest.

So Gideon took the tablet and fled. Just as Zoroaster extorted obedience from kings, Gideon planned to extort money from the wealthy. He would send them the first part of the story anonymously just as he'd sent it to Ganelon. Then he'd use the threat of the punchline to bleed them for the rest of their lives.

Back in London, he made rubbings of the tablet. He had Underhill translate the front and Bolton the back. Underhill's translation killed Bolton because Bolton knew the ending. But it didn't kill Gideon, who had carefully pocketed Bolton's translation unread.

So the joke worked in English. But Gideon's dream was international. He hired translators in all the major languages and repeated what he'd done with Underhill and Bolton, using their English version of the joke. The unlucky ones he gave the punchline to all met Bolton's fate.

Ganelon wasn't a millionaire and didn't know his part in all of this. But now he understood the terrible risk Underhill had taken to come and warn him. Without ever reading the punchline himself, Gideon still had a thousand ways he could use it to kill Underhill. He could hire someone to whisper the fatal words in his ear in a crowd or shout it from a passing car. Or have it placarded on every bus or sandwich-man in the city.

Or spell it out in alphabet soup. Yes, Ganelon knew the first part of the story, too. So he was as vulnerable to the punchline as Underhill.

Outside, on the Academy steps, the detective paused to ponder his next move. Feeling a tackiness under his foot, he looked down and found a red cross painted on the stone. Then he noticed that people coming up the steps were making a wide circle around him and staring up over his head where, five floors above him, a nine-foot Heintzman grand piano hung on broad leather straps.

He sprinted back inside the Academy and followed the concierge's directions to the stairs leading up to the roof. During school vacations Ganelon had toured with his reformed-jewel-thief, active-concert-pianist mother, spending much of it stretched out comfortably beneath grand pianos as she practiced or per-

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formed. This familiarity with piano underbellies came in handy during the war. The German Zeppelins carried the Fong Armaments bombsight. The Fongs boasted it could drop a grand piano down Buckingham Palace's chimney. In the War's first months, the Zeppelin masters used confiscated Belgian instruments to try to do just that, hoping to demoralize the British. They failed, but inspired the Woodbine cigarette people to issue a series of grand-pianos-of-the-world trading cards. The British tommies Ganelon met in the trenches collected these cards avidly and were so impressed by his ability to distinguish a Heintzman from a Sherlock-Manning that they gladly followed him on his night raids into no man's land.

Ganelon burst out onto a roof strewn with bodies dead of gunshot wounds. One—Ganelon recognized him as the driver of the piano delivery truck—lay over by the parapet close to the Fong Armaments bombsight and the hammock of straps holding the piano aloft, a machete clutched in his dead fist.

Standing at the parapet, Ganelon gazed out across the rooftops to where the Mediterranean hung blue in a blue sky. The coroner's people had come and gone. He had asked the police if a Theo Gideon was registered at a hotel in the principality. They had just gotten back to him. Gideon was not.

Overhead an ancient tri-wing Prentis-Jenkins Hedgehog lumbered across the sky dragging a banner. "See Napoli and Die," it said, referring to the city's largest undertaker. Words to mute the festivities, perhaps. Some said the Napolis came from pikeman stock.

The airplane's message could just as well have been from Gideon, leaving Ganelon lying dead on the roof wearing the Mark of Zoroaster. His only chance to survive was to locate Gideon. The punchline would have to be somewhere close by so others could use it to kill for him. If Ganelon could find out where, maybe Gideon would be the one who ended up wearing the fatal grin.

A trip to the morgue might point him in the right direction. Mrs. Bolton had been Gideon's lover before he murdered her. If they'd been staying together somewhere, Gideon might still be there.

The tourist traffic was heavy and he was delayed by the parade of comical automobiles carrying the participants in this year's zany hat competition. At long last he reached the morgue.

Among Mrs. Bolton's effects, he found a yellow Padishaw lead pencil. Ludwig Fong saw early that to rule the world he must control communications. To that end, he acquired China's vast graphite deposits and soon dominated the pencil market. So it was not strange to find a Fong pencil in any pocket or handbag in Europe. But under a pocket-glass this one revealed faint scratches

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on the Manchu yellow paint as if once clutched in a hand armed with razor-edged mandarin-length fingernails. Mrs. Bolton's nails were sensibly short. Lady Emerald Fong's were not.

At her late Uncle Parnell's wake—Fong of the Silver Tongue, they called him, and said he could flatter pigs into climbing trees—at his wake, when the time came to close the lid of the coffin, which stood in the corner like a five-day clock, the corpse argued silkily against the shutting and might have carried the day had not Lady Emerald Fong severed the living tongue from the cold flesh with her fingernails. They lay the still-chattering appendage in a gilt casket filled with poppy juice. Even Fongs hoped for Heaven and meant to rouse the tongue from its drugged slumber to plead their case before the Judgment Seat while high in the trees of Paradise pigs snorted and snuffled agreement.

Wherever Mrs. Bolton and Gideon had been staying, the pencil suggested Lady Emerald Fong had not been far away. Ganelon thought of the Fong gambling boat out beyond the three-mile limit and checked his watch. He had sneaked aboard the boat several times during his struggle with the Fongs. If he hurried, the same disguise might serve him again. He hailed a cab to take him back to the rue Blondin.

Later, another taxi deposited a brown-robed monk of the Order of the Holy Vernicle on the Quai des Matelots. He took his place among the other monks waiting in the quai-side launch. No one recognized him. Simply by taking off his shoulder-holster and Hrosko automatic Ganelon shed his trademark lopsided grin. He'd had a small skin-colored skullcap made up to serve as a monk's tonsure and complete his disguise.

By the time of his death, St. Magnus and his monks had driven off the local dragons as well as a plague of devils who rode about the San Sebastiano countryside in suits of armor, claptrap boiler-plated contraptions of clacking cogs and wheels resembling windmills on horseback. Then the monks fell under the influence of St. Boniface, who had them find secure hospices for Holy Land pilgrims as far as the walls of Acre. Later they became inn-masters whose establishments, the Sign of the Saracen Dog, with the head of an Egyptian wolfhound over the door, came to symbolize hospitality across Europe.

The monks survived the suppression of the monasteries during the Captain-Generalcy by bartending in the Cellars. They have been dispensing spirits and spiritual counseling ever since. Many worked the bars of the S. S. Mrs. Henry W. Nesbit.

The launch arrived alongside the gambling boat. When the others headed for the locker room and their black bartenders' trousers and pinstriped vests, Ganelon, who already wore his

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beneath his disguise, set off in the direction of reception, throwing his robe into the next chambermaid's basket.

The young man behind the desk, one of those pretty Irishmen, the devil's cherubim the Ganelons called them during the Fong troubles, with eyelashes a whore would die for, consulted the register. Yes, a Mr. Gideon was staying with them; he gave Ganelon his stateroom number.

Ganelon descended to Gideon's deck. Once, hearing someone coming, he slipped into an unlocked cabin and peeked out to glimpse a man carrying a suitcase and a raincoat over his arm disappear down a gangway. When Ganelon started out again, more voices sent him ducking back inside. This time it was Sean Fong, pompadour and all, with several highbinders, one carrying a bucket that smelled of rat ambrosia, a substance so irresistible to rodents that exterminators use it to bait their poisons. He watched them take the gangway, too.

At last he reached Gideon's stateroom. The door was unlocked. He slipped quickly inside, certain he would find the punchline. But he triggered something and a narrow sleeve of iron bars dropped from above to surround and hold him. Instinctively Ganelon grabbed two fistfuls of bars. A bird-lime substance caught and held his hands. When he set his feet on the crossbar for leverage to free himself, his feet stuck, too. He was straining to break free when the cabin lights came on.

Lady Emerald Fong sat at a desk facing the door: four Chinese highbinders on her right, four stocky little Irish spalpeens, the pug-nosed sweepings of Killarney and Kildare, on her left. Highbinder or spalpeen, there wasn't a profile in the round-headed lot.

Their mistress's skin was perfect ivory, with a dusting of freckles which lent a pixie air even her unsmiling Irish eyes could not contradict. Drumming a yellow pencil on the desk blotter, she spoke, her voice mixing the lilt of Ireland and the sing-song of Old Cathay. "You have brought your handsome clay pot to the well of the Fongs once too often, Ambrose. You invent these reasons for our paths to cross. Back in Sligo we'd call boys like you 'lamplighters,' flirts who get the girls interested and then walk away." Her smile was brief, suggesting childhood memories which were short on happy days.

"I tried to kill you twice today and should crush you like a bug," she continued. "But something about you touches my mothering side. So I offer you a partnership. Marriage. A brood of wee ones running about. The name Fong-Ganelon dances on the tongue. Yet I must be mistress. Only a Fong rules a Fong hearth."

As he struggled to free himself from his inelegant situation, Ganelon cursed her through clenched teeth.

Ludwig Fong's granddaughter raised one long fingernail. A

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highbinder with a fat paintbrush began applying rat ambrosia to Ganelon's trousers from the belt downwards. "Before you refuse, consider the alternative, Ambrose," she suggested.

At her next signal, the spalpeens shoved two stout wooden poles through the bars of Ganelon's cage, picked it up, detective and all, and carried it like a sedan chair out into the hall. They set the cage down next to an elevator. Then their evil mistress came closer. Tapping her pencil on the bars, she said, "My brother Sean has gone below to whet the appetites of your welcoming committee. The rats will go quite wild when they hear the elevator, knowing dinner's on the way. A slow ride down. Lots of time to think over my offer."

When Ganelon opened his mouth to defy her she shoved her pencil between his teeth, eraser end out. "If you change your mind, just push the Stop button. It's the only button that works. But when you do, Ambrose, it means you've agreed to a little training course to bend you to my will."

The spalpeens trundled Ganelon into the elevator and set the cage down. Then they stepped back out into the passageway. The door slid shut. The elevator began its trembling descent. Ganelon spat the pencil out and made an open attack on the glue holding him captive. Back there in the cabin he'd felt it give. But elasticity was its strength. It gave but didn't break. As the elevator settled into the bottom of the shaft he regretted spitting out the pencil which could have helped him play for time. He was thinking of Blanche Gautier when the door slid open.

Even war in the trenches hadn't prepared him for the carnage that met his eyes. Blood dripped everywhere. The last of the rats were scurrying through it, back into the closing slot in the wall. Three red skeletons in sodden rags made a pile by the door, which was streaked with bloody finger marks. A fourth, a skeleton flayed clean of flesh right up to the scalp line, leaving only the red pompadour intact, was hanging in a death grip from an overhead pipe. How long, Ganelon wondered, before gravity had dragged Sean Fong's legs low enough for the rats to leap upon them?

There stood the rat-ambrosia bucket, the wood licked white as new. Ganelon remembered now hearing an odd rapping as the elevator door opened, the sound of a ladle against another bucket summoning the rats back home. He had no doubt the summoner was Gideon. Had he been the man going down the gangway? Did the suitcase and raincoat mean the punchline was leaving the ship, perhaps even the principality?

It cost Ganelon time and skin to free himself from the bars. Then he pushed the dead remains away from the door with his foot and was not surprised to find the door was now unlocked.

He hurried upward until he came out on the evening deck. San Sebastiano glowed in the distance. The ship's crew were rushing

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about. His escape had been discovered. Without a second thought, Ganelon dove into the dark water.

Never a strong swimmer, he was happy to see the fireworks barge. He rested there, hanging in the water. Then he completed his swim and, sodden and his teeth chattering from the cold, was picked up by a passing police car. They had been looking for him everywhere. The prefecture had received a bomb threat against the life of Prince René.

The close relationship between his family and the House of Tancredi demanded Ganelon be by the prince's side when he was in danger. Fortunately René had only one public event left on his schedule, bringing Reiteration Days to a close with the Shaggy Dog Awards. So head cold, raw nose, cap and bells and all, Ganelon was there at Academy Hall the next day. He spent the morning supervising the police in their inspection of the hall, a steep rise of seats around three sides of a small stage. They checked under the seats row by row, crawled beneath the stage, and clambered up the narrow iron ladder to examine the space between the roof and ceiling. They found no bomb in place. Perhaps it would be carried in and thrown by someone in the audience.

That afternoon, just before the ceremony, Ganelon was waiting at the main entrance to the hall, eyeing the last of the crowd as it filed in. Twice he sneezed, making his own little racket of bells. Finally the reception-room doors flew open and the prince emerged with the judging committee, whose chairman carried the famous embroidered bag with the winning entries. Then came the members of the Academy, including Emile Lang, in rank on rank and all properly capped and belled.

The prince came over to commiserate with Ganelon about his head cold and inquire into his marital prospects. (The Tancredis were growing anxious for a Ganelon heir.) He was delighted when Ganelon hinted he might have met the right woman.

As if she read his mind, Blanche chose that moment to signal the Palace All-Girl Orchestra to strike up the overture to Scalamandre's operetta *The Man from Poet and Peasant,* the colorful life of Francesco Lazaire, San Sebastiano's first Minister of Culture and Agriculture. The prince led the way into the hall with Ganelon close by and forty Academicians marching behind them in solemn sway.

The crowded hall was a cliff of faces, many belonging to hopeful Shaggy Dog contestants. The procession mounted the stage by a flight of steps over the orchestra pit while the cinematographic people cranked their cameras and the newspaper photographers jostled to capture the image of a Ganelon in cap and bells on film. The detective felt his nose immense and as red as Prince Bo-Zo's. He

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imagined it in splendid magnification up on the newsreel screen.

René took his place on the small throne near the front of the stage, with the judging committee and Ganelon nearby. The Academicians stood at the back. Then the children from the orphanage came on stage to start things off with a touching synchronized pantomime rendition of Petitpas's Manifesto, wind, glass box, rope, moustaches, and all. Ganelon was happy to get through the patriotic silence without a sneeze.

Now the prince and the judging committee approached the podium. Ganelon stood more toward the back, scanning the upper seats. The close quarters were ideal for a bomb thrower. Or perhaps the assassin might take the suicide route and slip in among the award winners with a bomb hidden on his person.

René began with a few jokes, decorated with rim shots and the rush of Blanche's tambourine. Then the awards began. Ganelon moved closer to the podium, hand inside his jacket on the butt of his Hrosko automatic. The funniest Shaggy Dog stories written to last year's punchline were judged in three categories based on length: standard, miniature, and toy. The prince read the winning story in each category aloud. Amid the applause each winner came up to receive his prize.

The last winner was returning to his seat when suddenly, from the uppermost row, a woman dressed in widow's weeds with a glittering tiara rose and began shouting, "We are not amused!" She kept it up until the police got to her and carried her away. Ganelon had edged backwards to keep an eye on the protester. Now he joined in the relieved laughter. It looked like they'd made it through the awards with no attempt on the prince's life.

But he had forgotten the final part of the ceremony. Prince René still had to read the new punchline for next year's stories. The chairman of the committee took the envelope from the ceremonial bag. The Prince opened it and drew out a sheet of paper.

Here Ganelon felt a sneeze coming on. He made his upper lip as long as he could to fight it back.

"And Anaxamander says . . ." read Prince René.

Anaxamander? The shock of the name unleashed Ganelon's sneeze. As a man, the forty members of the Academy turned toward him in a cacophony of cap bells and hissed, "God bless you!" Whatever Anaxamander said, Ganelon didn't hear it.

Suddenly Ganelon understood. The foiled attempts to murder him, the threat against the prince's life, everything. Gideon wanted Ganelon to die here with the Zoroaster grin on his face and the newsreel cameras catching it all on film. After that, what millionaire could resist the man's extortionist demands?

And that explained Gideon's visit to Lang. It got him inside the Academy. He hid there until it closed, found the punchline enve-

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lope, steamed it open with the Director's teakettle, and substituted his deadly one. Then he let himself out the concierge's window in the staff common room.

Something was happening at the podium. The puzzled committee chairman had stepped forward and was whispering in the prince's ear. René showed him the punchline. The chairman glanced at it and shook his head decisively. The prince apologized to the audience. He had been given the wrong envelope. Then he surrendered the podium to the chairman, who recited the correct punchline from memory.

But Ganelon's attention was focused on what Anaxamander said, on the piece of paper the prince had crumpled up into a ball and now held between thumb and index finger. When the chairman's recitation ended and the prince signaled for a rim shot, the ball of paper flew out of his hand and down into the orchestra pit.

Ganelon caught Blanche's eye, nodded, and hoped she understood. But the ceremonies were over and he had to follow the prince out of the hall.

When Ganelon raised his hand to knock, Blanche called for him to come in. She sat at the small table where one day her crystal ball would go. A smoothed-out sheet of paper lay there now. "Something told me this would interest you," she said. Picking it up, she began, "And Anaxamander said—"

Ganelon stopped her. He explained about the Mark of Zoroaster, Gideon's grand plan, and how he'd had Underhill and Bolton killed and murdered Mrs. Bolton and the London translators.

"I see," she said. "Yes, I'm afraid I do see."

Ganelon nodded. You didn't need second sight to understand that he and Blanche had no hope of a future together. Sooner or later, they would have a fight and, Blanche's temper being what it was, she would let slip Anaxamander's words. Even if she never did, those words would always be there, hanging over the relationship.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then Ganelon said, "The scented stationery," referring to a box of lavender notepaper he'd given her when the Valletta case had taken him to Rome.

He smiled when she asked if he wanted it back. "No," he said. "But we might still do Gideon a bit of mischief. It just might work. At least it's worth a try. You see, he fancies himself a ladies' man. I was hoping you would write a letter for me." He nodded at the piece of paper. "Leave off the 'Anaxamander says' part. Sign it, say, 'A Secret Admirer.' Something like that." Ganelon handed her Gideon's home address. "I got this from my friend Haverstick."

"The Sweeney?" she asked.

"That's the one. We'll let him mail it. An innocent London postmark would be best." ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

SPECIAL DELIVERY

by Steve Hockensmith

Me and Santa Claus, we got a thing or two in common. Not in the looks department, obviously. I look more like a shriveled old elf than your classic jolly fat man. But the way I see it, Santa's a trucker, just like I was for thirty-something years.

Now, obviously, he ain't a trucker in your literal, Biblical sense. The man don't drive a rig and he ain't a teamster—at least, far as I know. But he's the fella who gets the goods from point A to point B. The elves, they're the manufacturers. And the kids, they're the consumers. And Santa's the man who brings 'em together. Just like a trucker.

You know, I even pulled a Santa one year. Worked a real Christmas miracle for the children of River City. Well, for a particular toy store in River City, really. And for myself. But it's a whopper of a Christmas story all the same. They oughta make one of them cartoon shows about it, like the ones they show on TV every year. Fetch me over a plate of them nachos and another beer, and maybe I'll tell it to you.

Thank you kindly.

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Steve Hockensmith is back with another Christmas story that blends, as he says, "yuletide commercialism with criminal skullduggery." Readers may recall that last year Mr. Hockensmith led our holiday issue with his story "I Killed Santa Claus." Another of his stories, written for *AHMM*, is to be included in the upcoming *The Best American Mystery Stories* anthology from Houghton Mifflin. ❡

So now let's climb in my magical time machine and go waaaaaaay back to that ancient year nineteen and eighty-three. I had it pretty sweet in those days. My wife Bootsie, God bless her, she pulled in good money at the Lawn Devil plant. That was before they packed it all up and shipped it to Mexico, you understand. Back then Lawn Devil brought good money into River City—and into our house. I owned my own rig, didn't work for nobody but myself, could do a job or not do a job as I pleased, more or less. Not many truckers have things that cushy. This was years before Bootsie got sick.

We were all set for our usual Christmas Eve. Bootsie's momma was gonna come over with a ham, we would give each other presents, the boys would get in a fight about who got what record album and who got what poster and who got what T-shirt and what all. Then Bootsie and her momma and me would sip on some Fuzzy Navels and sing along with Johnny Mathis and Elvis while the boys sneaked out back to go kill a six-pack with their friends behind the garage.

It don't sound like much, does it? But, boy, I miss it.

Anyway, that didn't end up happening this particular year anyhow. Because the day before Christmas I get a call from Ivor Boraborinski. He and his brother Basil, they used to run a small transport company down around Evansville. Still do, now that I think of it. They're a bit on the seedy side, but not what you'd call outright shady.

Now whenever I got a call from a Boraborinski, I knew it was gonna be something interesting, because those two boys never stuck their noses into anything that wasn't. Every job with them was a double-rush long-haul ask-us-no-questions-we'll-tell-you-no-lies kind of deal.

"Got a job for you, Bass," Ivor says.

"Uh-huh," I say.

"You'll probably want to leave right away," he says.

"Uh-uh," I say. But that doesn't faze Ivor.

"You'll have to be back by ten A.M. tomorrow," he says.

I don't even bother with an "Uh-uh" this time. Remember now—

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"tomorrow" is Christmas Day.

"Round trip's about a thousand miles," Ivor says.

I could've whistled or groaned or asked him just how much Jim Beam he'd put in his eggnog, but I stayed quiet.

And then he mentioned how much he'd pay.

Bootsie heard me gasp from the kitchen and hustled over, looking worried. She probably thought somebody'd died or the church had burned down or one of the boys had got himself arrested again. I gave her a don't-worry shake of my head, but my words didn't comfort her much.

"You know I don't haul drugs or guns, Ivor," I say.

"I'm not asking you to," he says.

"Well, I don't get it, then," I say. "Cuz that figure you just mentioned is obscene. If it was a movie, Jerry Fallwell'd tell me to boycott it."

And then he said something that *really* made me think he'd gotten carried away with the Christmas spirits that day: "Have you ever heard of a Cabbage Patch Kid?"

Well, I hadn't. I look at Bootsie and roll my eyes and do that little finger-circle-around-the-ear crazy sign. I figure I'm talking to a loony tune. "No, I have not," I say, getting ready to hang up before he asks me whether I believe in the Abominable Snowman.

"They're dolls," he says. "Ask your wife about 'em. She'll know. Everybody's crazy for 'em this year. Stores can't keep 'em on the shelves. You've got people practically killing each other for the chance to buy one. There've been fights, riots, you name it."

"Over a doll?" I say. I still don't exactly believe him at this point, but he's starting to make some kinda sense.

"Over a doll," Ivor says. "And right now in River City, you can't buy a single one of 'em. Sold out. On Christmas Eve."

"Uh-huh," I say.

"The company that makes 'em is working around the clock to meet the demand," Ivor says. "The folks at Monkeyberry Toys have a consignment on order that'll be ready tonight at midnight. One thousand dolls. And they know they can sell every dang one of 'em—if we can get 'em back to River City on Christmas Day."

"Uh-huh," I say. "Can you hold on a minute?"

Ivor grunts at me, and I slap a hand over the mouthpiece of the phone.

"Bootsie," I say, "Ivor Boraborinski wants me to do a special haul for him. Like right now. About a thousand miles."

"Uh-huh," says Bootsie, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I drop it. I tell her how much they'll pay.

"You want Pepsi or Mountain Dew this trip?" she says.

"Mountain Dew," I tell her.

Ivor overhears that and knows what it means. He begins telling

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me where to go to pick up the dolls.

Now usually, Ivor'd have me pick up a load of this or that on my way out of town. In the trucking business, it don't pay to go anywhere with an empty trailer. But Ivor just tells me forget it, this is rush-rush stuff and the Monkeyberry folks couldn't get anyone else to do it and the profit margin is covered but good. I've just gotta grab them toys and get 'em back to River City by Christmas morning.

See? Just like Santa Claus.

So less than thirty minutes later, I'm headed east on I-64. Pennsylvania, here I come. Turns out them "kids" don't grow in any cabbage patch. They're made in a factory in a dumpy little industrial park outside of Pittsburgh.

May as well have been the North Pole, though. Whammy! The second I hit the road, here comes the snow. It starts off all slow and pretty and I've got my Johnny Mathis on the tape deck singing, "Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow," and it's real cute. But darn it all if Mother Nature don't take Johnny serious. The snow just doesn't stop. It didn't take long to go from cute to a pain in the butt to downright dangerous. And I've got hours and *hours* to go.

That's where the Mountain Dew comes in. Load me up with a couple cases of that stuff and I could drive to the moon and back without making a pit stop. When one can wears off, I pop open another. And when I get tired of that, I start tossing Lemonheads in my mouth to give it an extra kick. A man can't live on caffeine alone, you know. He needs sugar, too.

So by the time I get to the factory, here's what I've got on my bodily odometer: fifteen cans of Dew, two jumbo boxes of Lemonheads, God only knows how many cigarettes, enough beef jerky to start my own cattle drive, and about five hundred close calls with ice, snow, deer, state troopers, and cars driven by drunks and pinheads. And I've got to face that all over again on the way back, all without a single wink of sleep. Which is not exactly legal, but you know how it is. A trucker's logbook's got more fairy tales per page than Mother Goose.

When I finally get to the factory, it's something like eleven forty-five in the P.M. Right on schedule—on my part, anyway. But it turns out I'm the twentieth truck in line. They've got people in the factory working quadruple overtime, those dolls are breaking the sound barrier as they come flying off the assembly line, and still they're behind schedule. The demand was just too great. So I'm told to sit down, shut up, and wait my turn.

Which I do. But not till after I've gotten me my first gander at them dolls. They're in boxes all pushed together by the hundred and wrapped up tight in industrial plastic. But if you get up close and squint you can see their pudgy faces back there, like row after

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row of chubby little mummies staring out at you through their shrouds.

"Holy Cheez Whiz," I say. "That's what all the fuss is about? Looks like somebody busted these babies in the face with a baseball bat. Any kid with one of those in her bed's gonna wake up screaming for sure."

The toy people aren't exactly amused by this comment, maybe because they're just as tired as me. So I shut my trap and climb into my cab and turn up my Elvis Christmas tape real loud. But I'm off my stride with the Mountain Dew, and nature takes its course.

One minute Elvis is singing about having a blue Christmas without you, the next he's telling me to run for my life cuz them Cabbage Patch Kids are the unholy spawn of Satan. I even see one peeking at me in the rearview mirror, its beady little eyes glowing in the dark, blood trickling from its nasty puckered mouth. I try to yell for help but nothing comes out. The little monster's pulling at the handle of the door and there's something pink and pulpy caught in its sharp teeth and I hear it say, "I'm hungry, Daddy," and I can't move a muscle and *knock knock knock.* Suddenly some bossy foreman's telling me to wake the heck up cuz it's my turn to load up.

First thing I do, of course, is pop open another soda. Then I take a peek at my watch—and nearly give myself a Mountain Dew shower, I jump so bad. It's almost two in the zippity-doo-da morning! Those unmentionable so-and-sos let me sleep for two blankety-blank hours!

I rev up my rig and whip around to the loading dock and back up at fifty-five miles an hour and hop out and start tapping my foot and staring at that loading crew so hard my eyes are about to pop out of my skull. They get the message, too.

"Take it easy, fella," the foreman says to me. "We know, we know. We've got families to get home to, too."

"Yeah, but mine's five hundred miles away," I say.

"Okay, okay," the foreman says, all irritable like, but he and his boys work fast. Twenty minutes later he's sticking a form under my face saying, "All right, fella, sign it and haul."

I look in the trailer and don't like what I see. The thing's more than half empty.

"That's a thousand dolls?" I say.

"No, it ain't," the foreman growls. "It's nine hundred and fifty dolls." He slaps the paper he's trying to get me to sign. "Just like it says in the order."

"All right," I say. "You know your business."

"Damn straight," the foreman says—pardon my French.

I sign and I haul.

The snow's still coming down as I pull out. There's maybe eight inches on the ground at this point, and it's starting to drift. It

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don't look good. But I'm in a fine mood cuz I'm finally on my second leg, so it's just one more big push and I'm home. The factory's about five miles off I-71. All I've got to do is get on the Interstate, crank up the Christmas tunes, and let Mountain Dew do the rest.

I'm about halfway to 71 on this dark little two-lane stretch through the woods when I see a big orange sign propped up in the middle of the road. "Detour," it says. There's a black arrow pointing off onto something that looks about half a step up from a deer trail. But the weather being so bad and all, I just figure it's drifting up ahead and the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation must know what they're doing, right? I turn off onto the detour road.

Now this isn't one of your classic straight-as-an-arrow roads mapped out by a cartographer with a degree from a big state school. It follows a creek bed. It twists and it turns and it doubles back on itself until you don't know if you're headed east, west, north, south, or straight down. I was out of sight of the main road before I'd gone fifty yards. By the time I'd gone a hundred, I was beginning to think about turning around—if I could ever find a spot to do it. Eighteen-wheelers aren't exactly known for their maneuverability.

Of course, I'm not too happy about what this is gonna do to my ETA. And "not too happy" becomes "downright p.o.ed" when I see a fella in the middle of the road up ahead waving his arms. A few yards behind him there's a rusty old Buick half on, half off the road at a cockeyed angle. Looks like some Bud-happy yahoo couldn't handle the snow, and now it's up to old Bass to save the day . . . while ten A.M. Christmas morning gets closer and closer.

I'll admit it—there was a part of me that wanted to just keep on truckin'. But I guess all that "joy to the world" spirit of Christmas stuff was sloshing around in my head along with all the Mountain Dew. I stopped.

I roll down the window and lean out and say, "What's the trouble, buddy?" To which the fella in the road has two interesting responses. One, he rolls down the stocking cap on his head so it covers his face—turns out it's a ski mask. And two, he reaches under his coat and pulls out a revolver, which he proceeds to point in the general direction of my head as he walks over to my truck.

"No trouble here, 'buddy.' Unless you make some," he says.

I'm usually pretty good with the snappy comebacks, but this time I'll admit I wasn't up to the challenge. All I could get out of my mouth was something none too snappy like "Wha"?" or maybe "Huh?"

"Out," the fella says, waving the gun with three quick little jerks of his wrist. "Out out."

Now I don't know about you, but my first inclination is to do what people pointing guns at me tell me to do. But just as my

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hand wraps around the door handle and I'm getting ready to climb down from my rig, I see lights flashing over the snow. Headlights. Someone's driving up behind us. Could be the state police. Could be some poor sucker about to get his head blown off just cuz he's in the wrong place at the wrong time. Could be both. I freeze.

Mr. Gun glances down the road toward the lights, then takes another step toward me. "You deaf or somethin'?" he says. He cocks the revolver. "I said out."

The lights are close now—so close Mr. Gun is lit up like he's up on stage at a girlie bar. Plain as day I can see his faded blue jeans and raggedy parka and muddy good ol' boy boots. And I notice that his hand's shaking maybe a little more than the cold would account for. And I start to figure that this here highwayman ain't exactly Jesse James. Which doesn't help whoever's driving toward us. This fella might not be a professional, but he's got himself a gun, and that can be enough.

The crunch of snow and gravel's getting pretty loud now, the lights are getting brighter, but Mr. Gun's still focused on me me me.

"I'm not kiddin' around here, you so-and-so," he says, except his language is a little stronger than that. "Get out of the ding-danged truck."

A beat-up red pickup pulls to a stop behind him while he's saying this, and I figure this is when the shooting's gonna start. I'm getting ready to throw myself down on the floor of the cab and start praying for divine intervention when I notice the orange Detour sign lying in the back of the truck. A heavyset fella steps out of the pickup and walks up to Mr. Gun. He's got himself a ski mask, too. His has got "Campbell's Soup" written across the forehead and "M'm! M'm! Good!" on the chin. The mask is stretched so tight across his fat face the fabric looks like to rip, like maybe it's three sizes too small.

"What's going on here?" Mr. Soup says. Except it sounds more like "Whuz goin' on hee-er?" He's got him a Southern accent so thick you could make a mattress out of it.

"He won't get out of the truck," Mr. Gun says, sounding kinda nervous, and for the first time I notice his accent instead of just being hypnotized by his Smith and Wesson. Sounded like these two were mountaineers—hillbillies up from West Virginia.

"Well, heck," Mr. Soup says, and he snatches the revolver right out of Mr. Gun's hand. He steps up on the footboard of my rig and brings the barrel up under my nose. "This just isn't your night, is it?" he says, and a big grin stretches the fabric of his mask even further. "First truck we saw went *whoosh*—right by our little Detour sign. Didn't even slow down. The second one came down this way but didn't bother stopping to help my buddy here. On Christmas Eve, yet! So we've been out here waiting a looooooong

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time. We're cold, we're tired, and we want them babies. So just step out of the truck and I won't have to mess up your pretty face with a couple of bullets."

Now the more this fella talks to me, the more time I've got to stew on things. I'm not a brave man, but I can be a bad-tempered man, and a temper can make a coward do things a bona fide he-man hero would think was crazy. And I was getting madder and madder that these two holler-dwellers were trying to steal my rig after all the hours I'd put in—and with all the money I had waiting for me at the end of the haul. So I decided I wasn't going to make it easy for 'em.

"You say you want what now?" I say.

Mr. Soup's grin goes a little lopsided.

"Cabbage Patch Kids," the former Mr. Gun—now Mr. Gunless, I suppose—says from behind him. "We know you got 'em."

"Cabbage Kids?" I say, giving Mr. Gunless a "What the . . . ?" look. I turn to Mr. Soup and lower my voice. "Is he all right?"

Mr. Soup's smile has flopped all the way over into a frown now. "Don't think you can b.s. me, mister," he says. "There's only one factory up that road that's still workin'—the toy factory."

"Yeah, that's right," I say. "I just dropped off a load of plastic there. I don't know nothin' 'bout any 'Cabbage Babies' or whatever it is you're looking for. Sounds to me like something you'd get in a grocery store."

I see a little fire kindle in Soup's eyes and I'm beginning to wonder if I've just made the biggest mistake of my too-short-by-half life when I hear Gunless say, "What are we gonna do?"

"He's lying," Soup says.

"What if he's not lying?"

"He's lying."

"What if he's not lying?"

"He's lying!"

"What if he's not lying?"

"He's lying, you dot-dot-dash fool!"

Gunless goes all silent for a second. Then he says in a quiet voice, "What if he's not lying?"

Soup takes in a deep breath. When he exhales, I get a nasty whiff of Cheetos and beer. "We're gonna check," he says to his partner. "And if you *are* lying, I'm not gonna kill you with this," he says to me, giving the revolver a little wave around the vicinity of my nose. He reaches up under his jacket with his left hand and fiddles with something. The hand comes back with a Rambo-looking hunting knife in it. "I'm gonna kill you with this."

"There'll be no need for any killing," I say.

"We'll see about that," Soup says. "Now gimme them keys so we can open up this trailer and take a look."

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Lickity-split, a plan forms in my head. I give the yokels the keys, then while they're in back checking on my cargo I hop out and slip into Soup's truck, which is still sitting there with the engine running.

Just as quick, Soup seems to have the same thought.

"Better yet," he says, "get on out of there and open it up yourself." He steps back away from the door, but he's still got that gun on me. I get the sudden feeling I've bluffed about as far as I can bluff and any more dillydallying is gonna get me a hole in the head bigger than the one I've already got.

"All right, all right," I say. I pull the keys from the ignition, open the door, and slip out of the cab.

I hit the ground and look up at Soup. For the first time, I notice how big he is. He wasn't any Andre the Giant, mind you, but he coulda been Andre's not-so-little brother. I turn to look at Gunless, and he's even bigger. I'd have to go up in a hot-air balloon just to take a poke at his chin.

Kung fu was definitely out of the question as a solution to my problems.

"Go on," Soup says. He doesn't give me a shove or anything cuz he's got his hands full with the gun and the knife. But those do all the shoving he needs done. I start towards the back of the truck.

I don't set any speed records getting back there. I'm calculating as I walk. Do I try to roll under the trailer and run off into the woods on the other side? Or do I . . . well . . . roll under the trailer and run off into the woods on the other side. It was all I could think of other than sprouting wings and flying away, which seemed like a bit of a long shot.

Just as I'm about to duck under the truck—and probably get a bullet in the butt in the process—there's no more truck to duck under, just those big darned semi wheels. I'd been so deep in thought planning my getaway, I'd blown my chance.

So there I am at the back end of my trailer with Rambo on one side and Goliath on the other, and I definitely don't feel myself growing any wings. It was beginning to look like there was no way I was going to save my truck. And the only way I was going to save my life was through vigorous begging and pleading for mercy.

"Open it up," Soup says.

I do as I'm told without any back-talk, knowing it's a little late to start earning brownie points but figuring I may as well try. I unlock the bolt and pull the trailer doors open.

And there plain as day before our eyes was . . . nothing. It was pitch-black in there. Soup and Gunless both lean forward, look at each other, then lean forward again.

"See?" I say hopefully. "Nothing."

"I don't see any dolls," Gunless says to the criminal mastermind.

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"Shut up," Soup spits back. He pushes up against the trailer and leans in real far, and I can see one little eye under the "Campbell's" squinting away. "There's something way back there." He squints so hard it's a wonder he can see at all. "In the very back."

"Oh, that," I say. "That's not them Cauliflower Batch Babies or whatever. That's just some . . . extra plastic. I've got me another delivery to make in the morning."

My little pause between "some" and "extra plastic" was maybe like one second long, but I knew it might have been long enough to earn me a hunting-knife bowtie. Soup gives me a stone-cold look, and I can tell he's wondering whether to slit my throat right then or wait to see how mad he should be when he does it. After a very long moment, Soup decides to save the fun for later.

"Get up in there and check it out," he says to his buddy.

Gunless just kinda gapes at Soup for a while—I don't know, maybe he's afraid of the dark or something—but then he turns and hauls himself up into the trailer with a big grunt. I get a gander at the full moon as he goes up, if you know what I mean. I don't know why it is hillbillies can't seem to keep their pants up over their backsides.

So Gunless goes groping slowly off into the blackness, and in a few seconds there's a "Oomph" that says he's bumped into my cargo.

"Whaddaya see?" Soup calls out.

"Can't see nothing," Gunless says. I hear his big hands pawing around over the shrink-wrapped dolls. "But there's something here, all right. It's big. Feels like it's all wrapped up in plastic."

At that moment, a terrifying thought pops into my head. All these two rocket scientists need to do is pull Soup's pickup around and use the headlights to get a good look inside my trailer. And it's while I'm trembling over this—not volunteering the idea, of course—that I finally sprout those wings I'd been hoping for. In a sense, anyway.

"Aww, heck," Soup says—or words to that effect—and he puts the knife and gun down on the back ledge of the trailer. Then he pulls himself inside with a big, "Why do I have to do everything myself?" sigh.

I'm so stunned by this it takes me a second to do the obvious thing, which is slam the trailer shut at supersonic speed. It takes Soup the same amount of time to realize what he's done, and I see him whirl around just as the doors go *clang* right in his face. I relock the bolt a split second before Soup throws himself against the doors. There's a crash, and I hear him stumble back and fall, cursing up a storm the whole time. A second later, things get really noisy when two sets of heavy boot-covered feet start kicking at the doors.

"Let me outta here!" Gunless screams. "Let me outta here!" He

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sounds real hysterical, like maybe he really is afraid of the dark.

That's when I take the Idiot Crown off Soup and put it on my own fool head.

"Now just calm down there, boys," I say. "I'm not gonna—"

The first bullet came flying through the trailer door and kept on going right through my jacket just under my left arm. The second one took a little nip off my left ear—you can still see the scar right there. I didn't wait around for the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth bullets. I dived headfirst under the trailer and threw my hands up over my head—not that my two little hands were gonna keep a bullet out of my brain if that's where it wanted to go.

Bang bang . . . bang bang bang . . . bang . . . click click. And then nothing.

I'm lying there in the snow and gravel and frozen mud under the back of the truck and I'm thinking, "Well, I'm cold and scared and my ear hurts like a hmm-hmm, so I guess I'm still alive." But I'm not too anxious to get up and take advantage of that, figuring that's just gonna invite Soup to start popping off again. And while I'm down there on my belly just trying to be quiet and think quiet thoughts, I hear Soup and Gunless in the truck above me.

"Didja get 'im?" Gunless says.

Pause. "I don't know."

"Y'know . . . if you did get 'im . . . who's gonna let us outta this here truck?"

Pause. "I don't know."

"You're outta bullets, too, ain'tcha?"

Pause. "Yes."

"Where are the extras?"

Pause. "In my pickup."

Pause.

Pause.

Pause.

"I'm scared, Kev."

"Shut up, Rickie."

Now you might think all my troubles are over at this point. But I've got me a dilemma on my hands. The responsible, law-abiding thing to do is head to the nearest state police outpost and drop Kev and Rickie off and let the great state of Pennsylvania decide their fate.

But. I can't just pull up and unload my new cargo like it's a bunch of frozen fish sticks. There are going to be questions. There is going to be paperwork. There is the great likelihood that someone's going to figure out how much driving I'd planned on doing in the span of twenty-four hours—an amount of time behind the wheel which is not exactly legal, you understand. And, most importantly, there is the one-hundred-percent absolute guaran-

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teed certainty that I am not going to make it back to River City by ten A.M. Christmas morning, or eleven A.M. Christmas morning, or even five P.M. Christmas night.

Which means all of this will have been for nothing.

So I did what I think any self-respecting trucker would've done. I crawled out from under the trailer, hopped back in my cab, fired up that engine, and got right back on the Interstate.

It took me seven hours to get to River City. And I didn't need any Dew to keep me awake. I had so much adrenaline pumping through my veins I could've won the Kentucky Derby without benefit of a horse. Plus, my ear was throbbing away the whole time, and it's hard to get sleepy when it feels like a badger's nibbling on the side of your head.

I pulled into the Monkeyberry Toys parking lot at 10:15 A.M. And I'm telling you, the place was packed. Cars cars cars—most of 'em empty. There was this big mob jammed around the front doors of the store. And when everybody sees me pull up, there's this big shout and all of a sudden I've got three hundred doll-crazy women chasing after me. I barely made it around the side of the store ahead of 'em.

In back there's the loading dock and about twenty Monkeyberry employees waiting for me. I also see five familiar faces: Basil and Ivor Boraborinski and my truckin' buddies Lek Reeves, Milford Corn, and Ernie Ortmann. I'd CBed ahead for the cavalry, and there they were.

While the Monkeyberry folks go try to head off the stampeding moms, I get my rig pulled around and back up to the dock. Then I climb out and go around back of the trailer, where the boys are waiting for me with the Monkeyberry manager.

"Good gosh, Bass, you look like heck," Lek says.

"You should see the other fellas," I say. "In fact, you can."

And I open up the trailer doors and there's my two Robin Hood wannabes squinting at the light—which they hadn't seen in quite some time except maybe what came in through the bullet holes. They looked like they'd just spent a day tumbling around in a clothes dryer. I'll admit, I didn't go out of my way to avoid every pothole I saw on my way back to River City.

"I suggest you two get a move on before somebody calls the police," I say.

Soup stands up slowly and stumbles towards us. He's still got his mask on, but I can read his eyes. He doesn't look angry or scared, just confused.

"Where are we?"

"The North Pole," I say. "Now scoot."

Soup looks us all up and down for a second, then comes to the only logical conclusion: He's getting off easy.

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"Let's go, Rickie," he says. And the two of them come on out of the truck, hop off the loading dock, and walk off into a beautiful, crisp, clear Indiana winter morning. From there I don't know where they went—and I don't much care.

"Don't explain," the Monkeyberry manager says. He's already rushed into the truck to check out the dolls. He comes back to me with a delivery voucher and a pen. "Just sign this."

"With pleasure." And I haven't even gotten halfway through my name when the manager man yanks the paperwork back and starts shouting, "Go! Get 'em! Go!" at more employees who almost run right over us they're so frantic to get those darned dolls on the shelves.

"So come on, Bass, tell us everything that happened," Ernie says after we've jumped out of the way.

"Well, I tell ya," I say. And my knees start to buckle at the idea of running through the whole thing. "Fellas, I'm exhausted. Thank you for your help, but I'm gonna have to give you a raincheck on the story."

The boys are all gearjammers like me. They know what it's like to come off a long haul. So they all slap me on the back and tell me to go on home.

"I'll have your check ready tomorrow," Ivor says as I'm going.

"You better," I say.

I don't know how I got home. The job was done, the adrenaline was wearing off, and I couldn't tell if my eyes were open or not. When I came in the door, Bootsie catches sight of my bloody ear and just about screams.

"Shhhhh," I say. "You'll wake up the boys."

"What happened to your ear, Billy?" she says. She's the only one ever called me "Billy."

I sit down in my La-Z-Boy and look at the Christmas tree and the presents underneath it and the cards and the porcelain Santas and the lights all over the place.

"I can't tell you how sweet it is to be home for Christmas," I say, and then I fall asleep in the time it takes to tell it.

When I woke up, it was December 26th. ●

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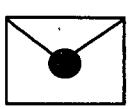

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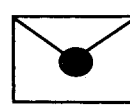

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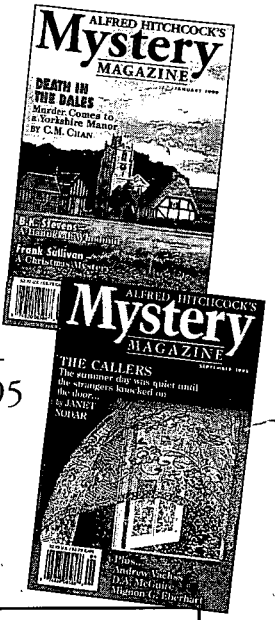

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